

# The Barnes Foundation

## Journal of the Art Department

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### CONTENTS

Creative Distortion: III. In Portraiture . . . . .	3
<i>by Violette de Mazia</i>	
Critical Method . . . . .	30
<i>by Frederick Goldman</i>	
Six Views of "Istanbul" – A Photographic Essay . . . . .	39
<i>by Evelyn Taylor</i>	
The Art in Lois Lenski's Book <i>The Little Auto</i> . . . . .	53
<i>by Lawrie Hamilton</i>	
Structuralism as an Aesthetic Model . . . . .	64
<i>by William E. Webster</i>	
Curriculum of the Art Department . . . . .	130
Publications Authored by Members of the Art Department Staff . . . . .	131
Illustrations:	
A Class in Session . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Plates 1 to 51 . . . . .	85–129

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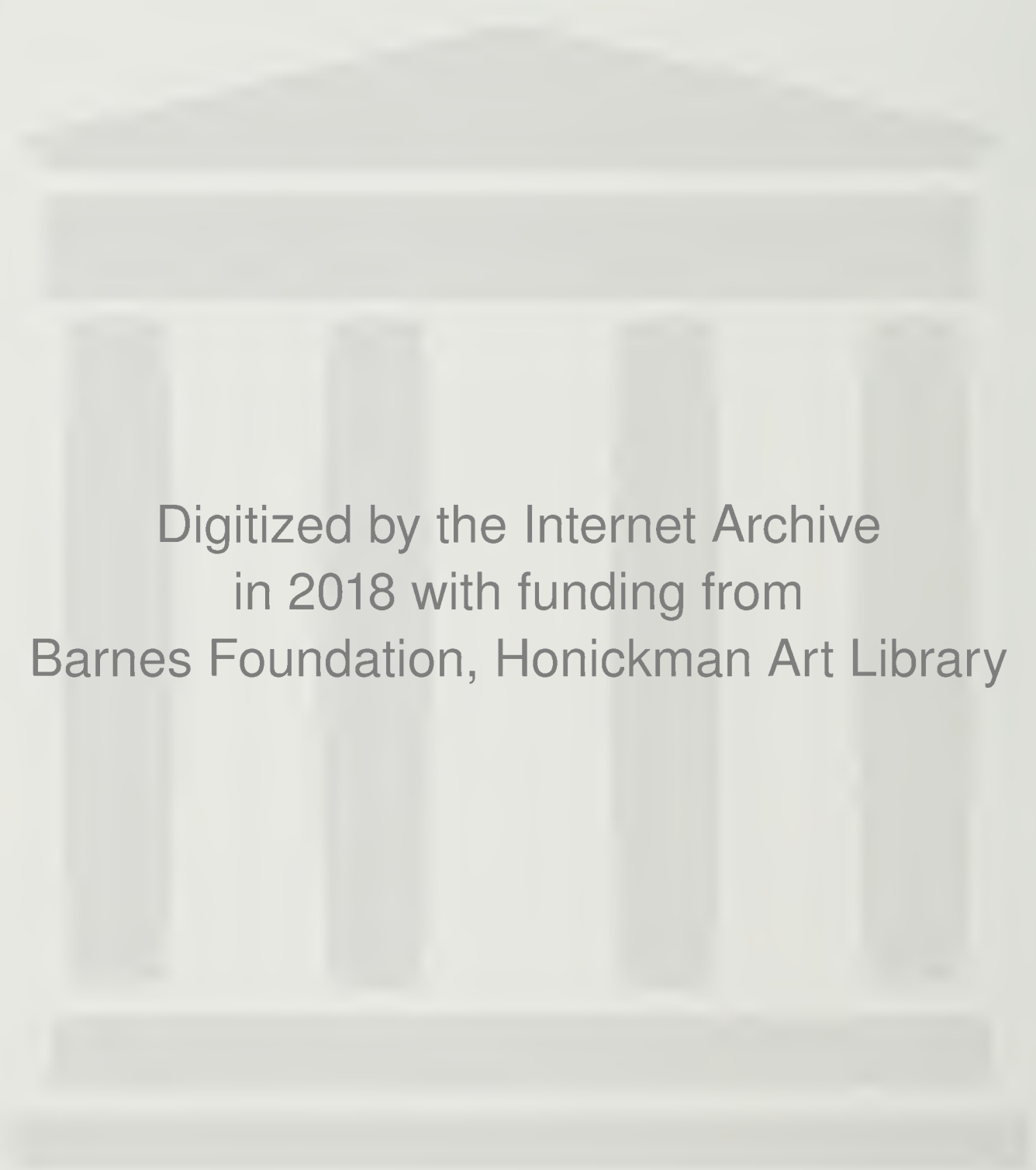
## Errata

The editors of the JOURNAL wish to thank two of our readers for the following corrections of material appearing in Vol. IV, No. 1 (Spring, 1973):

1. The original of *Mycerinus and Queen* (Plate 40) belongs to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and not, as we indicated, to the Cairo Museum.

2. The original of the *Palette of King Narmer* (Plates 44 and 45) belongs to the Cairo Museum and not, as we indicated, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which owns a replica of it.

We should also like to express our gratitude to another reader for the proper spelling of the name *M. Coqueret*, which appears incorrectly in Vol. I, No. 2 (Autumn, 1970) under Plate 9 of the illustrations and on pages 18 and 20 of the text.



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# THE BARNES FOUNDATION

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## Journal of the Art Department

*Editor*—VIOLETTE DE MAZIA

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The essays, etc., appearing in the issues of this JOURNAL will, for the most part, be derived from the work of seminar students, alumni, and members of the staff of the Foundation Art Department. On occasion, articles and pieces will be published not directly concerned with the Foundation's philosophy but representing original work by the Art Department's students and outside contributors which the editorial staff considers to be of general interest to the JOURNAL's readers. Publication occurs twice a year.





A Class in Session



# JOURNAL *of* THE ART DEPARTMENT

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VOL. IV

Autumn, 1973

No. 2

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## Creative Distortion\*

by VIOLETTE DE MAZIA†

### III. IN PORTRAITURE

IN the two preceding essays on the topic of Creative Distortion, we directed our remarks towards demonstrating that the principle of creativeness of itself entails the phenomenon of distortion. By this we do not, of course, mean any and all distortions, but specifically those that are pertinent to, and done for, the purposes of the expressive identity of a work of art and that are, therefore, justified by that identity. In essence, the point we illustrated was that the artist, as an artist, uses all the material available to him, including his subject, for his personal intent, his story of the story, and that he departs from the subject facts for the sake of picture facts, so that distortions are bound to occur. The aim of the present study is to show that this principle applies equally well to portraiture as to any other type of painting, provided that the treatment of a portrait, as of a still life or, for that matter, any kind of subject, be not doomed from the point of view of art by being but an effort at literal re-presentation.

In one of our previous discussions of Creative Distortion,‡

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\* Much of the material of this essay was originally presented in class demonstrations. The article is the third in a series on the topic of Creative Distortion.

† Director of Education.

‡ Violette de Mazia, "Creative Distortion," *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, Vol. IV, No. 1, (Spring, 1973), pp. 3-20.

we encountered what we called "The Case of the Levitated Pear," and who knows but that we may now find ourselves involved in "The Case of the Levitated Torso" or "The Case of the Severed Head." Such possibilities will undoubtedly be shocking to a great number of us, for many people who readily acquiesce to the artist's taking liberties with such subjects as pears, tables, etc., still find departures from the subject facts, at least insofar as they recognize them, unacceptable when a picture is to be a portrait. And, indeed, we might agree with this position, if we conceived of the painter's intent as competitive with the camera click. If, however, we acknowledge that a picture, besides having what is required for it to be a portrait, should also have what is required for it to be art, then we must admit that the principles of the creative process perforce apply. In this latter event, there is bound to be an effect of the subject on the artist, and there is, as a result, bound to be an effect of the artist on his subject from the standpoint of his aesthetic interest: changes will occur; hence, departures from the literal are to be expected. In other words, distortions will be present.

As a matter of fact, as we noted above, in terms of art there is no essential difference between what we call a portrait and other types of work—between, for instance, a painting of a group or of a single individual and one of a group of still-life objects or of a single pear or a composition of lines and shapes of color which permit recognition of something we know, such as figures, fruits, patterns, and so forth.

There are, however, certain special factors, certain conditions, which enter into what is usually referred to as portraiture. First, it deals with human beings, or, at least, things alive in the ordinary sense of the word: Manet painted portraits of dogs, and Munnings and Stubbs are well known for their portraits of horses. Second, the physical traits of the live beings—their facial features and expression, their garments, their general physical bearing, and such—are expected to play the basic focal part in the picture. Third, resemblance to the sitter's physical and psychological characteristics is more or less required. A



fourth factor, deriving from the others, is that, since the basic part of the picture, *i.e.*, the figure or group of figures whose portrait it is to be, is decided for the artist, portraiture creates a specific compositional problem—namely, that of relating the two main components, sitter and setting, so that they comprise a single, coherent entity while retaining the emphasis on the main constituents. From this point of view, Ben Shahn's "Portrait of Myself when Young" (Plate 39), for example, does not fulfill the demands.

Finally, there is a fifth factor, one which may become a real encumbrance for the artist. It is the sitter's feelings about, his attitude towards, the proposed portrait. This is an extraneous human element which affects the painter detrimentally and, consequently, what he will do as he tries to cope with it. A pear, a tree cannot dictate the angle from which it is to be painted; it cannot complain if it is left up in the air; it cannot object if it is portrayed as green when, in fact, it is red. A human sitter, on the contrary, can dictate, complain, object, and, whether knowingly or not, directly or indirectly, he usually does, even if only by wearing *that* dress, *that* necktie or having *that* nose.

Impositions all too commonly inflicted on the artist commissioned to do a portrait include, for example, such irrelevant stipulations as that the painting is to hang in *this* room, over *this* mantle; it has to reach high enough to cover the grease spot on the wall; it cannot go beyond *this* width so as not to interfere with the baccarat candlesticks given by the in-laws; it must pick up the color of the new curtains. Human vanity also plays a rôle in the situation, together with convention, fashion or vogue; for the sitter, it goes without saying, wants to be shown more handsome, more dignified or younger than he or she is. That this should be so is understood by either a tacit agreement or an explicit statement: the portrait is to be seen by friends and others, and there should be pride in the display of the artist's accomplishment; and what is that but pride in the display of how impressive uncle or father is, how youthful the dowager still appears, what a lovely Yves Saint Laurent dress the debutante daughter wears or what an important fellow the lawyer or doctor is. That general attitude is reflected in the

fact that nine out of ten portrait presentations written up in the papers are reported in terms of who the sitter is, who makes the presentation and where the picture will hang, all without a mention of the painter's name, let alone anything about the portrait as a picture.

Then, too, the artist must face mama, who insists that daughter's hands show, but that the painter must make the plump fingers long and graceful; further, the left hand is to be positioned so that the engagement ring can be seen, and the head is to be tilted down a bit in order to counter a somewhat stubby nose. "Remember," mama might go on to say, "the beautiful portrait of Joan Smith by so-and-so that won a prize in the recent annual. That's what I want you to do with our Peggy." Since a painter must eat if he is to paint, he is likely to comply as well as he can. And the result is one more flashy portrait, probably indistinguishable from the one of Joan Smith except for the fact that the title in the catalogue reads "Peggy" instead of "Joan," the dress is pink instead of green and the nose looks down instead of up; in both, the girl stands out "effectively" against some dark background—its color does not matter, since no one recalls it or what it is made of. It is nondescript anyhow, and who cares so long as the portrait is the spitten image of mama's idealized concept of daughter and her dress is "out of this world" and her engagement ring is such a gorgeous star sapphire. In short, it is a superb portrait!

The portrait painter is thus asked to play a dual rôle—that of beautician, or even plastic surgeon, as well as that of artist—if, indeed, he is allowed to play the latter part. For it can hardly be otherwise than that the products of the painter's brush done under the hypnotic power of mama or of the wealthy sitter are merely portraits, that is, articles manufactured under the pressure and influence of specifications completely extraneous to aesthetic purposes. Unfortunately for art, painting of that sort offers a way of making a living, and many young painters and students do it for the sake of putting some money in the bank, later, so they reason, to be free to paint as they want—a most dangerous plan for those who have real hopes of becoming artists. That was, in a way, what happened to Corot: in his early work (see



Plate 45), of the Italian period, he made a positive statement of volumes and space, but the paintings did not sell; however, people admired the feathery trees in the settings in which he placed his solid figures (see Plate 20), and so he painted nebulous, fluffy landscapes (see Plate 44); these sold, and his form as an artist deteriorated. The lesson to the art student who wishes to be an artist is that it is much safer to earn money through a job having nothing to do with art, so that he may retain his freedom of expression and, therefore, his integrity when he paints—not compromising art by compromising with it.

The above deals with the negative side of our topic, that is, noncreative distortions in portraiture. That there were departures from the subject facts, *i.e.*, distortions, in the works described is undeniable: the girl did not have the elegant fingers the painter presumably put on her hands; her nose was stubby despite what the picture probably showed; undoubtedly, too, the dark background usually to be found in the ordinary portrait bears little resemblance to what, in fact, was there, and, in any case, the painter certainly did not, could not, include everything, if only because of the restrictions of the medium—the size of the canvas, the nature of paint, etc. And we can be fairly sure that he also did not include everything because, in satisfying mama's demands or those of the sitter, he altered other things—perhaps softening shadows or emphasizing contrasts, perhaps intensifying colors or muting them. What it is that makes these distortions—ones that could, in actuality, be found in a portrait which is a work of art—non-constructive, non-creative, is the fact that they were done for, they work to accomplish, meanings that are irrelevant to painting as the embodiment of an aesthetic perception. And the resultant piece is, at best, but an aggrandizing imitation of what the subject was or wished to be and of no interest in any other function but that of showing the sitter off.

On the positive side of our question, we shall consider two portraits that are, as well as portraits, works of art—Titian's "Man and Son" (Plate 8) and Tintoretto's "A Venetian Senator" (Plate 17)\*—bearing in mind that, to read

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\* For the reader's convenience in following the subsequent analyses, these two reproductions appear on fold-outs that can be exposed while the text is being read.

the artist's piece, it must be considered a new object, with characteristics and meanings that belong to it as it exists here and now.

We can readily see that "Man and Son" is a portrait in the accepted sense of the term: two figures with their identity characterized constitute the principal units, and the rest, the background setting, is subsidiary. What the painting reveals of these sitters is of interest: we are shown two specimens of the human race to which we belong, and we are naturally inquisitive about what others look like. Further appealing to us is the fact that a psychological quality is conveyed by the sitters' facial expression and general bearing. On this level, too, there is the attraction afforded by the depiction of the dress of sixteenth-century Italy in Venice.

For many people, registering such information is the end of seeing and the beginning of a self-perpetuating process of fanciful "interpretation," divagation that, though of possible interest in itself, has nothing to do with the artist's work and is, therefore, most misleading. A prime example of this is Walter Pater, as in his essay on the "Mona Lisa." Among present-day "interpreters" are the countless authors of books on art and the lecturers in universities, museums and art schools. A museum in New York, for instance, not too long ago ran a weekly radio program called "Private Showing," which consisted of a group of actors giving a play about the subject, the sitter, of a particular painting; this museum would, upon request, mail a photograph of the painting to be used, so that the listener could look at the reproduction during the broadcast. Similar to this in inanity are the texts issued by a book club that accompany the art prints it sells. In the one that comes with Goya's "Don Manuel Osorio as a Child" (Plate 18), practically the entire page of text is devoted to outlining Goya's life, while the final inch and one-quarter is given over to the following *ipse dixits* and egregious flights of speculation—not about the painting, but about the subject:

As for the portrait of the little boy, it may be presumed that the artist loved children, since he had twenty legitimate offspring of his own. Certainly he loved to paint them, and this tender and elegant portrait of young Manuel Osorio is



one of the masterpieces of child portraiture. But Goya would not be Goya without the macabre note, as witness the huge cat whose interest in the magpie can hardly be termed Platonic.

Yet another instance was provided by a museum lecturer who, projecting a slide of Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (Plate 48) on a screen, said, and said only, "She is sad because she knows that she is soon to land on earth."

In our case, however, we are interested in Titian's "Man and Son" for what *it* is made of, for *its* character and meanings, whether or not these belonged to the sitters, and for what the artist has done to and with his subject to make this work significant in its own right. We may first note that the picture happens to be done in the manner of the old tradition, to which time has accustomed our eye and mind: there is, therefore, for most of us, an ease in taking it in, a readiness to accept it despite the number of departures from the subject facts, the distortions that are, in actuality, as contrary to nature—hence, by logic, as "bad," as "wrong," as "inadmissible," as much "against the rules"—as the levitated pear and the apparent disbalance in Cézanne's "Peaches and Pears"\* (Plate 46). It is now up to us to find out whether and how the distortions in the Titian portrait are effective departures from subject facts, *i.e.*, whether and how Titian's purposive doing to the subject is justified by what it achieves in and for the legitimate identity of the picture, as we saw the levitated pear in Cézanne's picture did, the ball-and-claw motif in the andiron did† or, in another context, the two-toed rendering of feet in Daumier's "The Miller's Daughters" did.‡

To answer this we need to determine what we see in the Titian portrait over and above the individuals portrayed, or, rather, what we see that is there *because* of the way Titian chose to portray his subject and to use it as a constructive part of his picture, as he used the other means of color, light, line, and so forth.

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\* Violette de Mazia, "Creative Distortion," *ibid.*, p. 4.

† *Ibid.*, p. 6.

‡ Violette de Mazia, "Aesthetic Quality," *ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 1, (Spring, 1971), pp. 23–25.

One major effect of Titian's picture as a whole is that of large, solid-looking volumes set in full, three-dimensional space, with a subtle, atmospheric ambience in front of and between the figures and all around them in depth. The illusion of depth within the two-dimensional framework of the canvas is achieved by the incorporation of a number of instrumental distortions. First, it comes by way of patterns of areas intercepting others—a distortion in the sense that it represents a visual "interpretation" of actuality. This is a prominent feature in the work of the Byzantines and other primitives, where it was the primary method for imparting a sense of depth; in these the space is realized only secondarily, as an effect attending the slicing and overlapping activity and huddling together of two-dimensional color units (see Plate 33). In Titian, too, there is a slicing, abutting activity as the figures intercept each other, but it is an activity very much qualified by Titian's development of other effects. At this point, however, we might remark that in the Titian, as in the Byzantine example, the interception constitutes a relationship which helps to unite the figures, welding them together, as it were, into a single, dynamically vital entity.

Depth in the Titian is also produced by linear perspective (the man's and child's shoulders and the angled placement of the figures)—the means of indicating space most often employed by the fifteenth-century Florentines (see Plate 10). But, while in the Florentines in general intervals of space are clear and measurable, in Titian there is an enveloping, dense atmosphere,\* which fills the intervals and penetrates the volumes, so that the volumes appear to emerge from the space rather than being set apart from each other by the intervals—a usage which, again, serves to emphasize the interrelatedness of the two figures and to imbue the entire canvas with a sense of tangible substance.

In themselves, the figure-volumes of Titian's man and boy are relatively static, as opposed to appearing to have been caught in poised movement, as happens, for example, in Courbet's "Woman with Doves" (Plate 12). At the same

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\* The degree of density, and also of warmth, of Titian's atmosphere is perhaps more apparent when we compare it with the atmospheric character of such a work as Courbet's "Woman with Doves" (Plate 12); in this regard, the effect of the Titian parallels the full-bodied sound-pervasiveness of a symphony orchestra as against Courbet's lighter, more rarified, chamber-music quality.



time, however, they are posed rather than set, planted or frozen as if they could not or would not move, in contrast to such figures as one would find in Cézanne, which tend to be rocklike, resistant to all efforts to dislodge them (see Plate 21). In the Titian the character of the pose is in keeping with the fact that the figures convey a distinct sense of simplicity and aliveness, an aliveness communicated by what the picture as a picture is, of which the figures are a part—*i.e.*, by what the picture conveys of broad human qualities that we associate with aliveness, such as glow, warmth, flow, substance drama.

To understand how the meanings of Titian's experience of the subject are expressed in terms of the picture makeup, we might, since the picture is a portrait, look in some detail at the illustrative aspect—man holds boy (indicated literally by the incident of one of the man's hands upon the boy's shoulder and the other clasping his hand). This is a fact of the subject, and, whether selected by Titian or stipulated for him by the sitters, it is a fact that acted on him, a fact which he experienced from the aesthetic point of view, *i.e.*, a fact to which he responded. This we can say because, as we shall see, the man-holds-boy relationship is conveyed not only literally, but also by what happens in terms of the artist's means—that is, by the manner in which the facts are told.

Besides what we have already noted of the action of the circumambient atmosphere and surrounding space, the man-holds-boy relationship is articulated by a continuous, all-inclusive sweep that encompasses the figures, a sweep of the outer boundaries, varied by gentle projections along the way—as by the heads, shoulders and hands—but never interrupted or broken (see diagram, Plate 7). This is, of course, Titian's own selective modification, distortion, of the subject facts, done here to say, as well as oneness or “holding,” bigness and power, as does, too, the direction of the sweep, the forceful, curvilinear upward and downward movement within an oblong shape. And we might also observe how, for the sake of assuring the continuity of this sweep, Titian distorted the area on the boy's sleeve just below the man's hand, thereby emphasizing the connection between the two units.

Man-holds-boy is further expressed by what Titian did to and with the individual units of his subject. It is, for example, inherent in the more or less parallel aspect of the S-curving of the man's fur lining and that of the outline of the boy—the curve of his own left arm against the man's torso. And, indeed, Titian shows a marked affinity for curves throughout, which he incorporates for the purpose of a compositional oneness (see diagram, Plate 30).

The illustrative theme is again stated by the relationship between the two "axial planes"\* of the principal volumes: one is set at an angle to the other, thus reinforcing its direction and location and creating a dramatic interaction between the two figures as of static units in dynamic movement. This, too, becomes an instrument of the picture aliveness, not just a meaning of the subject as such.

The orthogonal contrast of axial planes used by Titian is a feature frequently to be found in the traditions. We can, for instance, see it in Paolo Veronese's "Baptism" (Plate 9), in Rubens' "The Holy Family" (Plate 40), in Renoir's "The Writing Lesson" (Plate 51) and often in Cézanne—as, for instance, in "The Card Players" (Plate 41) and "Nudes in Landscape" (Plate 43)—who was especially interested in the dynamic activity it tends to impart to the picture. In each of the above examples, the drama achieved with the axial planes involves different subject things and different picture things and, therefore, results in different picture meanings. In certain respects, however, Renoir's version of it in "The Writing Lesson" is similar to Titian's: in the Renoir, for example, the drama of the axial planes is interestingly sandwiched in by the arms, not unlike what the arms do in the Titian, and in both pictures the device functions in part as an organizational feature that makes for a picture unity, a holding-together of the picture elements.

One of the important distortions by which Titian expresses the sense of bigness and monumentality that characterizes his work is his simplification of the subject facts, his elimination of details, at the same time that he intensifies the basic elements of volume and space. The device of simplification is

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\* An axial plane is the main plane in which a given volume is set.



also carried over into the compositional organization, which is primarily based on Titian's focusing attention on only a few units of the subject—the areas of the man's head, the boy, the clasped hands and the man's left shoulder. This selective emphasis, this distortion, works for a picture purpose, here for the creation of a version of a three-dimensional diamond, or cube, formation (see diagram, Plate 7). Titian's cube has, however, less rigidity than what, in contrast, we might find in a similar structure in Cézanne (see Plate 1) and this lends a gentleness to the naturally powerful quality of its movement around the figure units and into the space they occupy.

In the overall picture context, the three-dimensional formation is a part of the compact holding-in that characterizes the picture units—again, an expressive telling of the illustrative motif. It is a holding-in that comes about from the contrast of the internal cube formation against the upright oblong shape of the canvas, a holding-in lent drama by the sweeping curves and by the enlivening activity of the contrasting axial planes the cube contains. Furthermore, its apex, the man's head, is decentered to the right, a purposeful adjustment to offset the bold yellow of the boy's coat that, in effect, produces a dynamic, excitingly alive balance—yet another ingredient in the aliveness of the painting as a whole.

Titian's experience of the subject is also expressed in terms of his use of color.\* In "Man and Son" color as color, in the darkest areas as in the lightest, embodies and conveys in its way the sense of aliveness stated by the expressively illustrative aspect of the painting; there is an aliveness that is *of* the color and not the result of our reading into it the idea of "flesh" or "fur" or whatever else the method of portraying the subject allows us to recognize. That is to say, as color it gives us something we cannot get from, for instance, the color of dead leaves or from color in the work of such men as Botticelli and Bronzino. If we were to isolate a square inch

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\* Unfortunately, the reader cannot confirm for himself, or indeed follow in a full way, the points made about Titian's color without seeing the painting itself. Since, however, color is the primary tool of the artist, and since what he expresses is ultimately in its terms, discussion of the color cannot very well be avoided. It is, of course, to be hoped that the reader will at some time consult the original work.

of Titian's color and compare it with a square inch of the color in either of the above-mentioned, we could not help but see the difference: in Titian's there is a use of color chords\* and, as a result, a richness and a juiciness, qualities *he* infused the color with, that make for a decorative sensuousness not present in the others'.

Titian's color is alive partly because of the manner in which he used it to qualify the facts of the original subject. For one thing, it is made to flow over the boundaries of units, thereby serving the picture idea of fluidity and ambience by leading the eye in an easy passage from area to area and from volume to space. Furthermore, as it gives us the elements of the illustrative theme, color also penetrates, flows deeply into, the substance of those elements; thus, it likewise leads the eye into depth, carrying it below the surface that it, at the same time, designates as "ruddy," "yellow," "brown." Correspondingly, Titian's color builds up the structure of his units—the volumes and areas of space—and settles down within it, so that that structure is felt to be made of the color through and through—like the color of a stone or the color of flesh, in contrast to the color of cosmetics. For this reason, we call the use of color such as Titian made, a use which typifies the color effects of the Venetian tradition as a whole, "structural" color.†

Thus, we may say of Titian's handling of color that it is made a creative means, an element through which he constructively distorted the facts of the situation in the world to which he as an artist responded in order to accomplish something of picture significance from the point of view of broad human qualities—such qualities as fluidity, density, depth, subtlety (explain it if you can), decorativeness, aliveness, sensuousness, richness, juiciness and a convincing

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\* Chording of color refers to the technique of building up the painted areas by glazes and/or juxtaposed strokes of differing hues and tones. This phenomenon is more fully described in the footnote on page 7 in my article "The Case of Glackens *vs.* Renoir" in Vol. II, No. 2, (Autumn, 1971), of the *Journal*.

† Dr. Barnes was the first to note this difference in color quality between the Venetians and the Florentines and to apply the term "structural" color to the Venetian form. We should bear in mind that structural color is not "better" than non-structural, but it is by nature more conducive to the rendering of depth and internal solidity.



sense of what we might, to avoid the ambiguity of the word reality, call actuality.\* It is also in a sense true that Titian positively distorted the color itself, *i.e.*, he imbued it with qualities that do not belong to it as it comes from the pot. Therefore, the color has become as much *of* the painting as have the transformed facts of the subject.

Such effects of color that Titian attains are due, in great measure, to the technical character of the Venetian tradition—a technique of underpainting and multilayered glazing, which tends to give a translucency and depth to the color, even to the darks, and, in the Titian, is used to achieve a oneness and an overall muted tonality.† This we may contrast to the color effect of the Florentines, as represented, for instance, by Gozzoli (Plate 26), and Ghirlandaio (Plate 13), whose color is brighter, more opaque or solely of the surface of the picture units. In the general run of Florentine work, color merely colors the surface of volumes; that is, it does little more than serve to label a given area blue, green, etc., as we might also say of color in those modern fact-finding reporters in paint whose work is, for all intents and purposes, tinted photographs.

Titian's color owes much of its character to one of its aspects—light, or light in relation to dark, and both light and dark in relation to color. Indeed, neither the light nor the dark can be seen in isolation from color, for they hold color, are made of it, as it is made of them. In Titian's "Man and Son" we find an organic merging, or integration, of light and dark with color and a resultant warmth of inner glow, a depth to the richness of the color. This is a typical version of the Venetian rendering, in contrast to the effects of light found in such non-Venetians as Gozzoli (Plate 26), Botticelli (Plate 14) and Raphael (Plate 4), where light merely illuminates

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\* By a sense of actuality, we do not mean that the color is lifelike, but that it carries a sense of conviction as to the new identity of the picture units that it makes up—in contrast to color in the work of many Florentine painters, for example, Botticelli, which has not lost its identity as paint.

† The use of glazes has a lot to do with a sense of depth in Titian's case, but glazing does not automatically impart a depth and flow to color. It is still up to the artist to make the technique function for him, and there are many who worked in the Venetian tradition whose color is yet dull, dead, wooden, shallow, superficial and tinselly.

the surface hue or takes the place of color, much like the surface sheen of the worn elbows of a serge jacket. In the Venetians the relationship of light and color is, rather, of the sort that occurs in a red-hot poker—a one-with-the-other feeling that pervades the entire substance.\*

Light also serves other functions in the Titian. For example, light-to-dark transitions, specifically in the painting of flesh, occur very gradually, augmenting the color subtlety and sense of fluidity imparted in another way by the linear sweeps, glazing and color chording. Likewise, the transition from light to dark, and vice versa, helps to model and set things in space—an action, again, qualified by and qualifying color, for every pinpoint speck of color vibrates with both light and dark, producing a sandy, porous textural effect (see Plate 25). This is the dappling characteristic of the Venetians in general.† In the Florentines, on the other hand, light and dark and color occur in more or less shaped areas—as may be seen in Gozzoli (Plate 26) and Raphael (Plate 4)—without the sandy pinpoint intermingling found in the work of the Venetians.

The linear element in “Man and Son” is, like the element of light, also made to serve a number of picture functions. As the boundaries of the various units, it adequately describes the facts of the subject, helping to say what’s what and where each thing is. On the whole, however, the definition of the boundaries is hardly more than a slight condensation of, or change in, the tone of the color; and even when Titian delineates a unit with a dark border-band, such as that

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\* This difference between Florentine and Venetian light may be seen by comparing the effect on a sheet of smooth colored paper of a light bulb held in front as opposed to behind it: in the former case—the Florentine—it shines *on* the paper, thus revealing its opaque, non-textural surface color, or else it is reflected by it, so that the color is lost; in the latter—the Venetian—the light becomes a glow of enlivened and intensified porous color and reveals textural depth (see Plates 34 and 35).

† This Venetian dappling became, incidentally, the basis of the seventeenth-century artist Rembrandt’s characteristic light-and-dark relationship that we call *chiaroscuro*; in Rembrandt’s work (see Plate 2) it is a continuous blending of the three elements of color, light and dark that carries through even to the most pronounced depth. We meet later adaptations of this Venetian-Rembrandt idea in Daumier (Plate 38), Seurat (Plate 42) and Renoir (Plate 24). In Renoir’s work it is produced chiefly by way of the Impressionists’ technique of dabs and appears as a continuous scintillation of color and light.



around the fingers, because of the glazing, which tempers the sharpness of linear contrasts, the color flows on over, into three-dimensional space. This, again, represents a very different rendering of the artist's means from that of the Florentines, as illustrated by the work of Gozzoli (Plate 26) and others (*e.g.*, Plate 28), whose usage results in boundaries that are clean-cut and precise. Thus, partly because of their respective distortion of the element of line, the Florentine work is characterized by a sharp, clear patterning of the shapes of volumes and color units, whereas in the work of Titian and in the Venetian tradition as a whole the pattern is one of color-made volumes that link up with each other and with the space surrounding them.

The above-described effect of Venetian painting is dependent upon several features of the tradition in general that we have seen to belong to "Man and Son": (1) the fluid, pervasively permeating, penetrating color; (2) a muted overall tonality; (3) light-dark relationships in which light filters into the darks and vibrates within them; (4) the overflowing boundaries; (5) the sweeping movement of outlines that carries the respective volumes along with it; (6) the enveloping atmosphere; and (7) the blending, melting action of the glazes. Other features of the Venetian tradition include a rich, warm glow of light within color, a general interest in organizing the entire picture statement on the basis of solid volumes in deep atmospheric space and an interest in qualities of power, bigness, richness, monumentality, etc.—all of which occur in Titian's work.\* In the Titian, these features are used for an easy-going yet forceful in-and-out, up-and-down-and-around picture activity of thrust and sweep, a moving from volume to volume and into the setting, all the while that each unit of the picture preserves an identity of texture, surface, volume, weight, location, solidity. Within this ongoing activity, the compact volumes in the foreground build up a large, monumental, mountainlike, impressively massive and weighty pyramid. It is, however, a pyramid at

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\* It might be mentioned in passing that a tradition is defined by those painters who make successful expressive use of its particular methods and effects rather than by those who pervert those methods and effects to the expression of trivial and superficial ideas.

the same time modified by the calm, though powerful, movement of the sweeps forming the cube framework that lends an equilibrium to the enlivening compositional decentering and abutting of axial planes mentioned earlier.

The composite mass of the two figures asserts itself further by its specific relationship to the setting, where we find a wedge of space at each corner holding the volume of the figure-volumes in and holding the cube formation up and pushing the pyramid of figures forward. In this context, we should notice the occurrence of a particular modification of subject facts that leads to the distortion alluded to at the beginning of our discussion—a distortion as far from what nature allows as that which Cézanne dared when he suspended the pear in his "Peaches and Pears" (Plate 46): in the lower right section of the Titian canvas, the part of the body below the man's left arm becomes also a wedge of the spatial setting, and thus is the mass of his arm and torso detached from the area beneath it, giving us, as we anticipated, what we can justly call "The Case of the Levitated Torso."

As in the case of Cézanne's levitated pear, Titian's distortion serves the picture idea: because of its levitation, for example, the torso is projected the more forcefully forward and upward, and its bulk is emphasized. Titian employs still another distortion which, again, yet in a different way, emphasizes the impressive bigness and power of the man's figure—*viz.*, the proportion of the left arm and shoulder in reference to the face and hand. We cannot reasonably assume that the man was thus deformed nor that this distortion is due to Titian's lack of knowledge of anatomy or his faulty observation; familiarity with Titian's work makes it manifest that this was a deliberate doing to the subject for the sake of the bulk and the power he was interested in having the picture convey.\* His "Pietro Aretino" (Plate 3) is another instance of a similar distortion for a similar purpose, whereas in

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\* Nor is Titian the only painter to enlarge particular parts of his figures for the expression of power or bigness. We find, for example, a similar type of distortion in the work of Michelangelo, such as that of the proportion of shoulders in reference to hands and face in a figure from his "The Crucifixion of St. Peter" (see Plate 5). Matisse's "The Riffian" (Plate 31) again illustrates a use of this sort of distortion.



his "Antonio Perrenot Granvella" (Plate 6) he uses a different kind of distortion for a different kind of meaning—an elongation of the figure for the sake of achieving a feeling of liveness and elegance.

Titian's distortion of the shoulder-arm element in "Man and Son" serves a second picture purpose: it becomes an important mass at the right which balances the interest created by the light yellow color of the boy's garments. This is an example of what we can call "balance of equivalents"—a situation so much more eventful for the variety it holds than if it were a balance of identicals. In the Titian it is a purposive and effective distortion, in principle not unlike the two "plates" in Cézanne's "Peaches and Pears"\* (Plate 46). There is another "balance of equivalents," consisting of the repetition of the curved V-shape of the boy's lapels in the trim on the man's left arm, a feature we can once more compare with Cézanne's still life, specifically with the handling of the lying-down pear at the right and the cloth at the upper left. Titian's curved angle is further repeated in other units and used for yet another picture function; we find it in the man's collar and in various areas where figure and background meet, such as at the man's ear and, again, at his right cheek and at the boy's waist; in this usage it helps background and figure to belong to, and support, each other.

In essence, then, what we have found in the Titian are a bigness and simplicity that make for a sense of dignity, power and drama tempered with gentleness, richness, mellowness, fluidity, warmth, activity and a balance of disbalance, an order. Are these qualities of the sitters? Much of what the sitters were, to be sure, appears in the picture, and the qualities expressed are concentrated in the areas that indicate what they might have looked like; the painting is, after all, a portrait. There is, however, little real interest in that aspect of the picture now, except from the historical standpoint or as a springboard to our daydreaming—a meager but all too commonly employed substitute for understanding works of art—for we never knew the man or his son. And though we do know man, boy, color, pattern,

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\* Violette de Mazia, "Creative Distortion," *ibid.*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (Spring, 1973), p. 13.

power, drama, and so on, as a result of our own past experiences, it is not because Titian paints them in just the way that we have always seen them that we find his painting of interest, but, rather, because we have never known them quite as they are now, in this work, presented with those novel nuances that came to be from so-and-so's having been used as material experienced by the artist, as he also experienced color, light, line, paint and as he experienced the Venetian tradition itself, the Venetian life of the sixteenth century.

That Titian was affected by the prevailing way of seeing and saying is evident from his work. Equally was he affected by the rich, grand, opulent, sensuous, relatively large-scale living that went on in sixteenth-century Venice, in contrast to the more or less ascetic, restricted, compartmentalized life of the Florentines. In each case, the qualities typifying the environment appear in the works that were produced in the respective tradition. Yet these qualities did not come and go in the literal sense; that is, they did not belong to things, but to a selective, intentional point of view, a point of view which, modified by his own personal makeup, becomes the expressed substance of an artist's perception. It is in this sense, ultimately, that the subject, however recognizable the portrait may be or however faithfully it seems to portray the sitter's features and character, has been used primarily instrumentally, *i.e.*, has been creatively distorted for the saying of the artist's, Titian's, picture meanings. And it is in this sense, too, that all the artist's means, insofar as they are made to contribute to the here-and-now actuality of the picture, are distortions: line becomes *this* kind of line, color *this* kind of color, light *this* kind of light, etc., each time in order to accomplish something of picture significance from the standpoint of broad human qualities of aesthetic significance. In short, they depart from the subject facts in order to impart new aesthetic meanings. The picture, thus, is interesting to us because of what makes it up, only one aspect of which is necessary to satisfy the usual demands of portraiture: it is a portrait which, for those who know what to look for in a painting, is also a product of art.

Now we may say, if we have seen it, as we said, in earlier essays, of Cézanne's "Peaches and Pears" and of Daumier's



“The Miller’s Daughters,” that the subject of Titian’s painting was experienced aesthetically, and the meanings of his experience are expressed in terms of qualities intrinsic to his medium. Stated differently, his subject was imaginatively perceived and creatively distorted; that is, it was re-created with acceptance of some of its features and rejection of others, with emphasis on one element and a slurring over or simplification of another, with departures from subject facts for the sake of picture facts and a new specific organization—all with the result that the painting as a painting, regardless of who or what the sitters were, embodies, in new forms, human qualities of broad interest, that is, of possible interest wherever and whenever we live—in sixteenth-century Venice or twentieth-century America—whatever language we speak and whatever interest the subject may have as a subject.

Our second main example in the discussion of Creative Distortion in Portraiture is “A Venetian Senator” (Plate 17) by Tintoretto. From the point of view of broad human qualities, Tintoretto talks much the same language as Titian; that is, he expresses what he has to say in terms of the character of the Venetian tradition of the sixteenth century, although as the younger of the two\* Tintoretto also had access to Titian’s aesthetic contributions.

Our purpose in discussing the Tintoretto will be, in particular, to illustrate how much the meaning of the picture—even if the picture be a portrait and even if it be done from the same point of interest about the world as in the case of Titian, *i.e.*, within the same tradition—depends upon what the individual artist does to and with his subject and his other means. In other words, we shall be concerned with the fact that creative distortions are inevitably unique and are inevitably done for a new, never-before-expressed picture idea; the creative artist no more imitates another artist’s usage than he does the facts of the subject, however immediately his distortions may have been derived from the same source, the same tradition of seeing and of using the expressive means.

Certain dissimilarities are bound to occur between the two works as the result of a variance in circumstance: Tinto-

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\* Titian’s dates are c.1477 – c.1576. Tintoretto’s are 1518 – 1594.

retto's sitter differed from Titian's, and, therefore, so, too, do the facial expression, the features, the garments, the pose and setting. But, as we shall see, more important for the identity and significance of the picture is the fact that the artist was a different person, a different driving power behind the hand and brush.

We may first note that, because of Tintoretto's personality rather than the sitter's, though not altogether independent of the sitter, the picture conveys, to be sure, bigness and power as does the Titian, but we also discover a movemented drama, a forceful activity quite unlike what we saw in "Man and Son." Similarly, in the Tintoretto we do not find the flowing transition between volume and volume or volume and space; rather, we perceive one unit and then another, each relatively detached from its companions, but related to them in what we might call a staccato rhythm—a quite different effect, with a quite different picture meaning, from the more or less legato sequence of beats in the Titian. From this standpoint we could compare Tintoretto with Cézanne and Titian with Renoir—two creative artists who much later worked also in a single tradition, but whose work involves the expression of quite different broad human qualities—or, perhaps more correctly, we might say that Tintoretto is to Titian as Cézanne is to Renoir.

Also corresponding less to the differences in subject than to the differences in each of the artists' experience, we find in the Tintoretto a very personal device of distortion not present, in the sense of being a major means of qualifying the picture elements, in the Titian. This is the element of contrast, which is pronounced in every one of Tintoretto's expressive means, even in his color; the color contrast stands out more strongly in Tintoretto than in Titian not because he reaches greater extremes,\* but because of his dramatic use

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\* Although the bold yellow of the boy's coat in the Titian is an element of contrast, his handling of all the other means—the linear flow, the uniting cube formation, the pyramidal structure, the pervasive vibration of light, the continuity established between volume and volume and between volume and space, the gradualness of transitions, etc.—work to subdue the potency of this contrast, without, however, subverting the dramatic impact of the balance of disbalance in which the yellow is a participant. The yellow also contributes an important note of color variety and serves, in general, as one of the enlivening elements in the picture as a whole.



of light and dark. Furthermore, individual areas of color are broken up into more units, between which, as we mentioned, the transition is less flowing, so that the emphasis is on each in turn—on the light and *then* on the dark, on the brown and *then* on the, albeit related, purple. The volumes, likewise, are individually more stressed than those in the Titian, the subsidiary ones as well as the big ones; thus, they beat, one after the other, and, since they are solid and weighty, the sequence of beats is powerful.

All the effects that Tintoretto achieves through his exploitation of the expressive possibilities of the element of contrast are a matter of relationships, which, as we might recall,\* depend as much on what the units are as on how they are placed together. Imagine, for example, “A Venetian Senator” with the very same placement, but now of pastel-colored units or of units colored in the manner of the Florentines. Are the units in the same relationship? No, only in the same placement.

Also corresponding not so much to what the subject was as to Tintoretto’s interest in the use of the subject for part of his picture meaning is the manner in which he handled the linear factor. Here, outline is vigorous and vigorously emphatic, and areas of the subject are broken into a series of linear sweeps, forceful sweeps that, in turn, are broken into short, quick swirls—again, in contrast to Titian’s development, where, for his picture idea, line occurs as flowing, melting, tying-together sweeps. Thus does Tintoretto add an energy and intensity to the drama of the staccato activity. This particular usage constitutes another instance of the creative distortion of one of the artist’s means, and, reciprocally, of the facts of the subject, for the expression of picture qualities.

Another distortion instrumental to Tintoretto’s intent is the repetition of a specific sort of active swirl motif that, by its recurrence, helps to unify the canvas while it also insists on the quality of spirited animation; we may find it first as the light-accented ear, and then see a reiteration of this “ear” in the drapery pattern, hairline, eyes and eyebrows, nostrils,

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\* Violette de Mazia, “Learning to See,” *ibid.*, Vol. III, No. 2, (Spring, 1972), p. 19.

beard, clouds, sleeves, etc., each episode, however, holding sufficient variety to remain interesting rather than becoming monotonous. Likewise, a rosette formation appears in the drapery and on the front of the garment, and a pattern of striations is carried through a fold of the garment, the beard, the clouds. Also, there is a vertical banding throughout the setting that even works its way into the figure: at the left is the vertical band of the sky; at the right is a vertical banding unit of drapery, which is itself divided into two broad subsidiary vertical bands; and between sky and drapery is the dark, wide band of the wall, carried, at its left, perhaps overassertively, down into the man's garment—thereby threading, skewerlike, the figure to the background. This last might be criticized as being somewhat obvious, but it is not so obvious or so destructive to the picture as an integrated entity as is a similar compositional element in "A Venetian Procurator" (Plate 15) by a follower of Tintoretto. Indeed, in our Tintoretto it is, on the whole, an asset, for it functions as the primary agent for an essential subject distortion, one which establishes a fundamental theme of the work as an aesthetic statement: by its juxtaposition to the man's face, the dark wall-band, in conjunction with the piece of the drapery between ear and shoulder that locks in the head and seems to undercut it, forcefully sets the entire block of the head off, almost to the point that its bulk seems detached from the body—giving us "The Case of the Severed Head." There is, because of this, an added drama and forcefulness, a note of bizarre surprise, and, as we look further, we see that, in fact, each unit of the picture seems similarly severed from the others, carved out away from the rest; yet, at the same time, each part links up with the next by what it shows of basic qualities of color, light, dark, line, as well as by the staccato rhythm, *i.e.*, as well as by the part each plays as a punctuating unit in the space composition of the picture.

Space composition is of the Venetian type, although the staccato beat of units makes for a space that is clearer than that generally encountered there; volumes emerge more abruptly and are, in contrast to those in Titian and yet not to the degree of those in the work of the Florentines (*cf.* Plate 13), individually assertive, both in the figure and in the setting.



Within the composition, the setting is fittingly adjusted to the dramatically rendered figure. In itself, it is dramatic by way of what is depicted—a drapery that closes the space on one side and a window that opens into the distance on the other. This idea of the window device for the sake of drama has occurred elsewhere, both before and after Tintoretto, but what makes up the drama, how it is carried out, for what purpose, with what variety, is each time dependent upon the artist's intent, interest and experience. It occurs, for instance, in Botticelli, in Titian, in Seurat, in Cézanne and often in Tintoretto and his followers.\* What is important and interesting in each case is what each painter uses it for and what he does with it. In both Botticelli's "Madonna and Child" (Plate 27) and Titian's "Madonna and Child" (Plate 36), the window device functions as the top unit of a diagonal downward- and forward-tumbling compositional sequence that includes the woman and child. In Botticelli's "Portrait of a Woman" (Plate 29), the window device gave the artist the opportunity to establish an unusual diagonal compositional balance—that of the light of the window at the lower right with the focus of light on the woman's head and shoulder. In Titian's "Lavinia" (Plate 11), it becomes an element by which the theme of contrast is given variety, reversing, in the darkness of the bowl and arms against the lightness of the sky, the light-against-dark relationship of the woman against the interior setting. In Seurat's "The Models" (Plate 49), the "window"-landscape provides an opening that moves outward and upward, thereby emphasizing the character of the enclosed space in the interior, with the upward-moving area of the ground functioning as a plane which, with the wall at the right, helps enclose the interior space of the room. In Cézanne's "Boy in Red Vest" (Plate 16), the space-opening at the right lends a drama of

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\* *E.g.*, "A Venetian Procurator" (Plate 15), "A Venetian Nobleman" (Plate 19) and "The Presentation of the Virgin" (Plate 37). The term "window device" may be applied to any area of open recession, whether literally presented as a window or not, that functions as an element of spatial contrast in an otherwise close-at-hand background setting. On the other hand, the presence of an actual window in a painting does not automatically make for a window device: in Vermeer, for instance, and in the Dutch tradition in general, the window tends to be used as a source of light rather than specifically for an effect of spatial tension.

contrast to the setting that expresses, in a background way, the drama apparent in the figure. In "The Card Players" (Plate 41) of Cézanne, the "window" occurs as a subtle recession established by the slicing units of shadow on the wall to the left of the standing figure; in effect, it is a compositional equivalent of the drapery at the far right, reiterating the pattern of folds, yet offering the variety of space balancing volume; together the two, the shadowed wall and the drapery, work to enclose and present the main units of the painting.

In "A Venetian Senator," the window is used, as we indicated, for the possibility of an intense drama of contrast, now a contrast of closed and open space. And what Tintoretto does with it is, in principle, what Cézanne did with the two "plates" in his "Peaches and Pears" (Plate 46) and with the wall-drapery relationship in "The Card Players" (Plate 41) and what Titian, in "Man and Son," did with the boy and the man's shoulder and arm—*i.e.*, Tintoretto resolved the disbalance implicit in the contrast, he justified the inclusion of this dramatic subject distortion, by yet another distortion, specifically, by creating a picture situation of a balance of equivalents. He does this by identifying each unit with the other, by repeating the pattern of drapery in the clouds, by partly transforming the three-dimensional clouds into two-dimensional shapes and by detaching the two-dimensional shapes of pattern on the drapery from their ground so that they tend to become three-dimensional. The latter distortion is not unlike those in Cézanne's "Fruit and Tapestry" (Plate 47), and, as in Cézanne, though it creates an impossible situation from a naturalistic viewpoint, it cannot be called wrong because it is justified by what it creates of plausible, logical coherence, abetting the expressiveness of a picture situation and organization, which were, after all, Tintoretto's and not nature's. And Tintoretto's right to distort as he did is that of the artist's right, indeed, obligation, to re-mold the world "nearer to the heart's desire."

We might, in the context of our main point, ask what the drapery could have become if it had been re-molded nearer to Titian's heart's desire, that is, had it been imposed on him by his sitters. It is possible that, contrary to Tintoretto's solution, he would have lessened the distinction of the dra-



pery's pattern and integrated it with the cloth itself, at the same time bringing the drapery's weight to the character of the gentle clouds. But this is pure conjecture, based only on what Titian did elsewhere, ignoring the fact that the subject itself is also a source of ideas for the artist; it affects him as surely as do his past experiences, feelings, imagination, interests; and there is no way of telling what possible new effects Tintoretto's drapery and window in conjunction with Tintoretto's sitter might have done or suggested to Titian, who was, at times, also dramatically inclined, although not in the way of Tintoretto's emphatic swirl.

Our observations, in both Titian's and Tintoretto's case, about the organic relationships between background and foreground, sitter and setting, *i.e.*, relationships established on the basis of a picture idea, should be of specific significance to art students. It is to be hoped that it teaches them a valuable lesson, so that their work does not degenerate to the level of so many portraits wherein the relationships depend not on an expressive use of the artist's means, but ostensibly on the symbolic significance of the subject (a sportsman and his trophies, a collector and his *objets d'art*, a college professor and his shelves of books)—the literal or fancied facts of the sitter—hence a significance not of what things are in a picture situation, but of what they stand for elsewhere, functioning to say that the sitter was admirable, important, wealthy, had “good” taste, etc. The student, too, should be aware that a painting is a whole entity; the background is not, as one finds in the mere portraitist who is not an artist, an afterthought, a necessary evil that, since it would not do to leave blank, gets covered up, done away with, almost surreptitiously with whatever is left on the palette at the end of the day's work. In these latter, indeed, the background is treated as a garbage pail, a good enough place to get rid of all the messy, no-longer-usable leftovers; and it looks, then, like the garbage pail contents—a muddy mess of paint and brush strokes, thrown together without rhyme or reason, having no connection with the foreground figure except that both happen to share the same piece of linen.

To sum up our study of the two portraits, Titian's gentle power, warmth, fluidity, richness, mellowness, etc., and Tintoretto's dramatic animation, forceful activity and vigor are due to their respective instrumental use of the matter at the artist's disposal: in both, the sitters, the setting, the tradition, the means of expression constitute the material each artist experienced, and their new identity as each is made to participate in the picture as a whole justifies what each artist did—justifies Titian's levitated torso and massive shoulder and Tintoretto's severed head and distortion of the drapery pattern and the sleeve. The difference between the two might be concisely drawn by a comparison of their respective handling of the area of the man's sleeve. In Tintoretto this unit is broken up into its constituents—the individual folds, the lights and darks, the swirls, twists and turns, ins and outs—all of which, by Tintoretto's instrumental distortions, become contributing elements to the robustly dramatic activity of his picture in its entirety. In the Titian, the same unit appears all of a piece, with each individual element, including the subject details, such as the trim, submerged in the mellow, weighty, fluid unity of the color, tone, shape and volume of the sleeve itself. Thus, each man distorts, and each is creative in his usage, for what he does is for the sake of a here-and-now picture meaning—in the Tintoretto an effect as of units individually carved out of a ruggedly hewn block and in the Titian an effect of melting mountain massiveness.

In point of fact, then, the sky is the limit in reference to how far an artist may go in his distorting, provided the result justifies the distortion from the standpoint of what art requires: the figure may be as simplified as in Gritchenko's "Self-Portrait" (Plate 23), as *quasi*-caricatured as in Matisse's "Mme. Matisse with Vase of Flowers" (Plate 50) or as dismembered as in Braque's "The Portuguese" (Plate 22). It is true that beyond a certain degree of distortion the work will cease to be a portrait in the accepted sense, but it may still be an aesthetic object, a picture expressive in a personal manner of broad human qualities. The person who sat for it or commissioned it may not like it as a portrait, but that is in another category of things; if he understands it for what



it is, a work of art, he should appreciate it for that and engage a complying photographer for a flattering record of his likeness.

Two episodes may clinch the point which these essays on Creative Distortion are trying to make: Matisse's model, whom the artist used to paint day in and day out, one morning asked his permission to make a trip to nearby Nice. Matisse wanted to know why. She answered that she wanted to have her picture taken. And then there is the famous reply Matisse made when, in front of his *fauve* "Woman with Hat" of 1905, an onlooker commented on how horrible-looking a woman it was. Said the artist, "If that were a woman, I would myself run away from her. But it is not a woman; it is a picture."

In our subsequent essay on the topic of Creative Distortion, we shall further develop, using other examples of portraiture, the principles thus far established, with particular emphasis on the artist's use of the traditions and technique.

# Critical Method

## Speculations upon Objective Evaluation as an Approach to Understanding Motion Pictures

by FREDERICK GOLDMAN\*

*The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see!*

—D. W. Griffith

FILM as an art form represents the marriage of drama, literature, poetry, music, dance, painting, and sculpture, united through technology. Not all film-makers use all these elements, and very few use them well. The task of an intelligent, open-eyed and open-minded critic looking at film is to recognize what elements are being employed and to evaluate how well; it is only *then* that he is entitled to judge the artist-director's success or failure in achieving an expression of significant human values *in terms of the potential of his medium*. John Huston put it well: "The most important element to me is always the idea that I'm trying to express, and everything technical is only a method to make the idea into a clear form."†

Behold: *terra cognita*. As in perceiving the art in painting, we must in the evaluation of cinematic art identify *the picture idea*. This will not be the "subject" of a painting or the "plot" of a film. It is, instead, a statement meaningful to the human condition, capable of involving our intellects as *thinking* creatures while it engages our emotions as *feeling* creatures. Far from imposing restrictions upon the art form, this criterion encourages wide latitude for expression, requiring only that the practitioner's *input* be honest and original, yet not so precious or personal as to limit its significance to its creator.

Consider this brief sampling from film directors' own words: though not to be taken as fully descriptive of what

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\* Member of the Seminar of the Art Department.

† From an interview in *Film Quarterly*, (Fall, 1965).



each accomplishes of aesthetic merit in his work, they define “the heart of the matter” in a few words while revealing the catholic range of interests and attitudes these men bring to their practice of the medium.

The only thing that is an absolute for an art that deserves the name is a point of view. —Joseph Losey\*

What I am interested in is showing the things behind the things, not just to make statements on what can be seen. —Federico Fellini†

I strive for a cinema that will give me an integral vision of reality. —Luis Bunuel‡

For me, film is an attempt, still very crude and primitive, to approach the complexity of thought and its mechanism. —Alain Resnais§

Technicalities be damned! Film is an art form and must not be inhibited by anyone else’s interpretation of how you might behave or how an event happened. . . . Everyone has his own point of view. There are as many truths as there are faces. —King Vidor||

Note that none of these major artists is concerned simply with “story-telling,” though film—like drama and the novel—is generally considered to be a narrative medium.

Would that those who write *about* film were as clear in their critical stance as the artists they “review.” Unfortunately, they are not. One critic will argue that cinema is empty unless it tackles social issues (“Where’s the message?”), while another altogether rejects the tools of cinema (“bourgeois technology”) in behalf of “social realism.” Still others dismiss subject *and* content to focus entirely upon technical excellence, saying, in effect, that theme, narrative, and the film-maker’s personal vision of life and human values are inconsequential; what matters is *how* he uses his tools.

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\* “Mirror to Life,” *Films and Filming*, (June, 1959).

† From an interview in *Mademoiselle*, (November, 1964).

‡ “Cinema: An Instrument of Poetry,” *Theatre Arts*, (July, 1952).

§ From an interview in *New York Film Bulletin*, (March, 1962).

|| *King Vidor on Film Making*, David McKay Company, Inc., (New York, 1972).

These quarrels and quibbles are not criticism; they are casuistry. The "critics" stand indicted for their *inability to see*, not only in the sense of *understanding* but also in the more literal, physiological sense of perceiving the objective identity of the thing before them.

Needless to say, truly seeing is intimately bound up with perceiving in the sense of understanding. Recognition of this fact is the keystone to objective investigation in the sciences, where irresponsible thinking can lead to overt catastrophe rather than only to fatuous contention. That scientific objectivity is equally required for understanding in the field of art was implicit in Dr. Albert C. Barnes' belief that "the approach to aesthetics should be as disciplined and methodical as the approach to physics and chemistry."\* Introducing the discipline of scientific method, "the intelligent search for significant fact,"† into the study of art was a major milestone in the history of aesthetic criticism and education. It led to the eclipse of chaos by clarity and replacement of authoritarian proclamations, issued and debated by an elite few, with objective criteria, available to all.

In his excellent essay on the teaching of law, "The Case Method and The Barnes Method,"‡ Gil Cantor spells out the main consequences of using the objective approach in the classroom. To paraphrase:

1. It demands that the student consult "original sources . . . as opposed to secondary sources such as textbooks," thus providing him with first-hand knowledge of what it is he is attempting to understand.
2. It makes of the learning process a participatory problem-solving experience rather than a mere rote-and-parrot routine.
3. It trains the student to "make judgments on concrete facts," that is, to think constructively, purposively.

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\* Violette de Mazia, "An Experiment in Educational Method at The Barnes Foundation," *Art and Education*, The Barnes Foundation Press (Merion, Pa., 1969), p. 134. (I am indebted to Gil Cantor for drawing my attention to this passage in his article, reference ‡, cited below.)

† Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia, "Method," *Art and Education*, The Barnes Foundation Press, (Merion, Pa., 1947), p. 18.

‡ *The Barnes Foundation Journal of The Art Department*, Vol., I, No. 2 (Autumn, 1970), The Barnes Foundation Press (Merion Station, Pa.), pp. 35-41.



In short, it eschews “the teaching of abstractions and rules” which bear no necessary, demonstrable, or elucidating reference to the object or circumstance under consideration and, instead, engages the student in genuine, disciplined observation of the actual work of art, its nature and its significance.

Thus, a logical affinity is established between the artists’ stated intentions, as quoted herein, and the standards an intelligent and trained viewer will apply toward evaluation of a film. For cinema art—as for painting, literature, drama, dance, poetry, architecture, music, flower-arranging, etc.—the true significance of any work (and how we judge it) lies in its ability to enrich the qualitative meaning the world has for us as responsive beings. The necessity for being able to *see* and to seek understanding of any art form with open eyes and an open mind is certainly indicated, if by nothing else, both by the infinite variety of human values which may be explored in the media and by the infinite variety of the diverse personalities, talents, and intellects of the artists who explore them.

So, our first step in the objective process, as we noted earlier, is to consult “original sources”—*i.e.*, the visual statement itself, in film as in painting—to determine what constitutes its basic identity. This is *physiological seeing*, gathering the evidence of the optical sense.

In physiological seeing we find painting to be made of the primary material of visual actuality—*viz.* color, light, texture, line, space, volume, pattern, etc. Film is composed of exactly the same visual elements, but they are usually qualified by the presence of auditory components. Further differentiating film from painting are still other elements which are raw materials for the director’s range of expression, including the phenomena that arise out of the time-oriented, narrative aspect of the medium—cinematic and dramatic action, editing, plot, and, finally, actors’ characterizations. There is also the distinctive, special impact of the technology of cinema, which influences scene and action, just as the physical nature of oil, tempera, marble, and wood each affects the expressive nature of the art works for which it is employed.

Of particular importance in reference to technology is editing, which entails far more than a mere linking of strips of celluloid in order to present a sequential chronicle of events. As the great Pudovkin has flatly stated:

I claim that every object is a dead object even though it has moved before the camera. For movement before the camera is not movement before the screen. It is no more than raw material for the future building-up of the real movement, which is that obtained by the assemblage of the various strips of film. Only if the object be related to other objects, only if it be presented as part of a synthesis of different separate visual images, is it endowed with filmic life. Editing is the basic creative force by power of which the soulless photographs are engineered into living, cinematographic form.\*

In the final stage of determining the meaning of a work of art objectively, though we are still concerned with what it is, we now look for its *identity in terms of the qualities of its content*—that is, the values it has to offer to human responsiveness. These we find in the nature of the relationships that the artist establishes between his means. For example, in Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, there is an integration of the *regular* pattern of marching soldiers' legs descending the *regular* pattern of the Steps of Odessa with the chaotic, fragmented rhythm of the fleeing people, created by cross-cutting between them—an interplay of tensions which evokes stark, weighty, ominous *filmic* drama appropriate to the narrative-action. Similarly, in a Cézanne still life, the leadenness of color, the density of texture, the regularity of the rhythmic sequence, the stability of the compositional format, integrated and in balance, become the vehicle for the static, weighty, forceful power of his picture.

In *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles depicts in one brilliant montage the course of a marriage disintegrating over the years. The room, the breakfast table, the "props," and the physical position of the Kanes do not change from shot to shot within the sequence, while their facial expressions and

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\* Vsevolod Pudovkin, quoted in *The Miscellany*, March, 1931.



costumes do, and their conversation dries up. A similar technique is used by John Schlesinger, less ambitiously and expressively, in *Midnight Cowboy*: Joe Buck wearily trudges New York's honky-tonk 42nd Street, never breaking stride, as the lighting changes from day to night to day to night, and so on. Passage of empty time is denoted, but—a lack—not the draining of Joe's spirit. As a parallel in painting with cinematic montage, a Prendergast composition slices space and time, punctuating the progression with similar but changing shapes.

In Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and in Robert Enrico's *Zita*, slow motion and freeze-frame tableaux introduce expressionistic extravaganzas, highly appropriate and effective, just as Soutine, Kokoschka, Delvaux, and Severini distort their plastic means to stretch for a psychological weight beyond naturalism.

As a further parallel with painting, film has a "palette." We are sensitive to the expressive blacks of Manet and the sombre key of Daumier. Film artists, too, "paint" with tones and contrasts: for instance, Boris Kaufman's harsh, heavy "key-lighting" sets the mood for *On the Waterfront*; Mario Monicelli's grainy, "old-fashioned," almost sepia, tonality for *The Organizer* is true to the time and place of its tale; John Ford's stark lighting and empty, lifeless landscapes in *The Grapes of Wrath* are more eloquent than Steinbeck's "stagy" dialogue. In contrast, Haskell Wexler used Monet lighting and color delicacy to counterpoint the melodramatic action of *In the Heat of the Night*. Likewise, Sweden's Bo Widerberg not only had his characters in *Adalen '31* discussing Renoir paintings, he used a Renoir palette for his color photography—thereby heightening the drama and shock, and intensifying the tragedy which explodes suddenly from police repression of a strikers' peaceful parade on a lovely summer afternoon. One of the few really knowledgeable, broadly-cultured film critics, Dwight MacDonald, is keenly appreciative of Michelangelo Antonioni's "highly charged use of black and white in *L'Avventura*:"\* this is not the chiaroscuro, the gradual intermingling of light

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\* *Esquire*, May, 1962.

and dark, that seventeenth-century painters (or, among film directors, Bergman) were so fond of; this is a juxtaposition of the sharpest whites and blacks that, with all their jostling each other, remain achingly distinct—distinct and yet harmonious, for the blacks, whites and grays are tonally related, so that the foreground is not detached from the background as in the usual overlighted Hollywood photography. These “painterly” qualities have helped first-rate films to retain their timeless truth and appeal, even for audiences who know their “story.”

Thus, just as in painting, in film there is wide latitude for the artist’s insight, originality, and versatility in expressing broad human values. And, just as in painting, in film a viewer must evaluate the artist’s relative degree of success in achieving his “picture idea” before presuming to render a judgment. In the words of MacDonald, “As in all arts, form in cinema means the integration of the parts into a whole by means of such devices as rhythm, emphasis, balance, significant repetition, and variation.”\* Or, as Garson Kanin puts it:

Everything in a show has to hang together, has to be on the main line of what it’s about. It’s too easy to get carried away by a scene or a piece of business or, say, in a musical, by a single number, but it’s only good, it’s only important, as it relates to the whole. Have you ever watched a painter paint? Do you notice how many times he steps away from the canvas and looks at the whole thing? It’s because in his head somewhere he’s envisaging the entire canvas, and trying to fit every detail into that whole work.†

Ernst Lubitsch is also quoted as criticizing a pre-eminent and successful film director: “He directs scenes fine and sometimes lines and shots very well, but his pictures are no good.”

So, the only legitimate access we have to understanding the artist’s expression and evaluating it is through the exercise of objectivity. No less than in any other art form, film demands of us investment of intellectual effort commensurate with the seriousness and honesty of the artist’s work.

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\* *Ibid.*

† *Tracy and Hepburn*, Viking, (New York, 1971).



Finally, a word of caution: it is important to emphasize that scientific method in the study of aesthetics is a tool for understanding, a *process of thought*, not a stencil imposed upon art forms that allows only certain portions of a work to be viewed and thus predetermines the meaning to be found.

Ponder Miss de Mazia's injunction against

arrested perception . . . in the first stage of recognition. Interest has gone stale, has vanished; the bureau of intelligent censorship has folded up, and a habit-mechanism has usurped its place. While it is true that we see only what interests us, still, when we see nothing but what we have seen before, it is no longer interest guiding the selective process but a pair of blinders, immovably set like those leather flaps at the horse's headstall which prevent the horse from seeing beyond them to either side. And these "blinders" limit our perception by keeping our vision within a circumscribed range, hence denying to it whatever of novelty or difference may lie beyond. . . . Needless to say, the objective method cannot be limiting in this way.\*

Although practice of the scientific method in The Barnes Foundation's course involves close examination of aesthetic value in the specific terms of the art in painting, its ultimate application is unlimited. "All our efforts are in the direction of teaching the student how to learn to see—that is, to perceive the aspects of everyday life that are significant from the standpoint of their broad human values [of an aesthetic nature]."† And we are again indebted to Gil Cantor for these judicious quotations from Barnes and de Mazia:

The extremely literal-minded or habit-bound can take in a situation only if it repeats practically point for point one already encountered . . . .

At the other extreme are those who can detect very slight resemblance and, in so doing, discover the indispensable clue to the solution of a problem. All interpretation of really formidable novelty requires this ability to discriminate between

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\* "Method," *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, Vol. I, No. 1, (Spring, 1970), The Barnes Foundation Press, Merion, Pa., pp. 3–18.

† Violette de Mazia, "An Experiment in Educational Method at The Barnes Foundation," *Art and Education*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

the essential and the adventitious, and to carry away from experience a grasp of generalized connections applicable to innumerable things which need have no obvious common quality.

Genuine experience in reasoning and in artistic creation is a continuous process, each using the problems which arise and the material furnished by the past as food for an ever-renewed growth, and resulting in a constant reorganization both in the individual and in the world.\*

Let this be the definitive guide line for the Barnes-de Mazia Method as regards the art of film. Use the discipline of "method" as it was meant to be used—not as catechism, litany, or dogma, but as a critical, objective stance, an attitude tempering knowledge with flexibility, sensitivity, and open-mindedness. Then, with practice, we can begin, as Archibald MacLeish quotes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "to see, feelingly" and fully to enjoy the only art form ever born of technology. Sir Kenneth Clark, author of *Civilization* and narrator of its offspring, the television-film series, recently pointed out: "Within the past twenty-five or thirty years the great works have been films. The amount of talent or genius that goes into the making of a film is incomparably greater than what has been going on in any other form of art."†

Barnes-de Mazia trained viewers are uniquely equipped to perceive how and why.

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\* Albert C. Barnes and Violette de Mazia, "Experience and Growth," *Art and Education*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

† *University Film Association Journal*, Volume XXIII, 1971.



# Six Views of “Istanbul”

A Photographic Essay

*by* EVELYN TAYLOR

(Alumna of the Art Department)











































# The Art in Lois Lenski's Book

## *The Little Auto*

by LAWRIE HAMILTON\*

THE first time I went to The Barnes Foundation, two things happened to me: I experienced a physical sense of joy akin to my rejoicing in seeing the face of a friend I dearly loved after my friend had been away four weeks; and I saw the word "student" printed in a small folded sheet of glossy paper describing the Foundation's program. I became a student. It is with your knowing these fragments about me that I would like to share my understanding of the art in the children's story *The Little Auto*, written and illustrated by Lois Lenski.†

### **The Little Auto**

Mr. Small has a little Auto. It is red and shiny. He likes to look at it.

Mr. Small keeps the little Auto in the garage at the end of the driveway.

Mr. Small has overalls on. He is oiling the little Auto.

The little Auto has rubber tires. Mr. Small is pumping them up.

The little Auto has a radiator. Mr. Small is filling it with water.

It is a fine day. Mr. Small is going for a drive. He steps on the starter. The engine begins to hum.

The little Auto backs out of the garage. It goes chug-chug down the driveway.

The little Auto goes down the road. Mr. Small toots the horn, "Beep, beep!" He scares the ducks and chickens.

A small dog follows the little Auto, but is soon left far behind.

The little Auto is going fast. It passes a horse and buggy.

The little Auto goes UP HILL and the little Auto goes DOWN HILL!

The little Auto comes to town. Mr. Small drives down the right side of the street.

The little Auto comes to a STOP-GO sign, and waits for the policeman to turn it.

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\* Alumna of the Art Department.

† Henry Z. Walck and Company, Inc., (New York, 1934). Used by permission of the author-artist.

The little Auto goes down MAIN STREET.

The little Auto stops at a Filling Station. Mr. Small buys five gallons of gas.

The little Auto catches up with a Trolley Car. It waits for the people to get off.



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Mr. Small parks the little Auto in front of a store. He is going in to buy a newspaper.

The little Auto starts for home. It comes to a red light and waits for it to turn green.

On the way home it begins to rain. Mr. Small has to put the top up so he won't get wet.

"Pop!" Mr. Small has a flat tire!

Mr. Small jacks the little Auto up. He puts on the spare tire. And then the sun comes out!

Soon the little Auto is back in the garage. After it is washed and polished it shines like new.

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\* This is a sample of the author's illustrations; there are twenty-seven pictures in all.



Why is this brief story art? For these reasons: it expresses the essence of a human experience; it expresses broad human values—that is to say, observable characteristics which human beings respond to, such as order, simplicity, straightforwardness, clarity. And it is new. There is yet no studied tradition in children's literature, so I cannot say to you no one ever wrote similarly to Lois Lenski before 1934. What I can say, and what you can affirm for yourself, is the purity of her expression. It rings true. It is itself. Art is the pressing out of "itness," to use a "de Mazia" word.

The subject is plain enough. It was what happened in a day in the life of a man named Mr. Small who owned an automobile. I find it difficult to realize Mr. Small isn't still driving the same car around Winthrop, Iowa, where thirty-eight years ago he stopped long enough to have his story told. I have a parallel difficulty with the players in Cézanne's "The Card Players."\*

This sense of actuality comes not from the subject, but from what a person has done in expressing the essence of the experience depicted, in the one case, in words and, in the other, in color on canvas. We make the distinction between the subject and what the artist has done with it by calling the one "subject" and the other "subject *matter*." We are not talking about a car in Winthrop, Iowa, but a car and a man in a short, non-complex story with a simple plot told in simple words.

The simple plot satisfies my sense of order. Mr. Small has a little red automobile. He takes care of it. It is a fine day; he is going for a ride. He stops for a red light, buys a newspaper, gets gas, puts the top up, changes a tire. He comes home and puts the little auto back in its garage at the end of the driveway. And that's all. I have led a chaotic life, so the orderliness of Mr. Small's day appeals to me. Perhaps you have, too, and also respond to the orderliness, or perhaps not. In any case, we can agree that the plot conveys a strong sense of order. What does this sense of order mean to children?

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\* See Plate 41. This is a painting studied by Barnes Foundation students at the School and well worth meeting anytime one is in the Philadelphia area.

To answer my question, I would like to try to draw you back to early childhood through the experience of a group of young teenagers detained at the age level of early childhood. These severely retarded children and a doctor were working with some colored rods of different lengths. The rods were made so that a light green 3cm rod and a dark blue 6cm rod filled a 9cm space. With the blue 6cm rod in place, the children were to pick from various colored lengths of rod the rod to fill the remaining space. By trial and error, they all found the green 3cm rod that fit. Then with the 6cm rod removed and the 3cm rod in place, they were to find the rod to fill the new space. Again by trial and error, they found the 6cm rod. It took the children four or five cycles of matching by trial and error the blue 6cm with the green 3cm before they could pick, without hesitating, the rod which fit.

An observer comments:

I don't believe I will ever forget it. It was one of the most extraordinary and moving spectacles I have seen in all my life. . . . As I watched, I thought, "What must it be like to have so little idea of the way the world works, so little feeling for the regularity, the orderliness of things." It takes a great effort of the imagination to push oneself back, back, back to the place where we knew as little as these children. It is not just a matter of not knowing this fact or that fact; it is a matter of living in a universe like the one lived in by very young children, a universe which is utterly whimsical and unpredictable, where nothing has anything to do with anything else. . . .\*

Mr. Small's universe is entirely different. Its stability has much to do with the affinity children have for Mr. Small.

While the plot has great unity, with all the elements working together to produce a sense of orderliness, it does not lack variety. First, there is unity and variety in the language. Its basic unity is in the frequent use of the simple declarative sentence. Variety comes with the rhythmic play between "Mr. Small" and "it" as the doer of the sentence. "The little Auto stops at a Filling Station. Mr. Small buys five gallons of gas."

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\* John Holt, *How Children Fail*, (New York: Dell, 1964), pp. 93-94.



Variety also comes in the many things Mr. Small does. He changes a flat tire. He puts the top up when it rains. He smiles when he scares the ducks and chickens. He relishes going fast enough to pass a horse and buggy. There is a tension between the unfolding unity of Mr. Small's day and the variety of things he does, between the problems he confronts and their resolution. Without this tension, there would be no art in *The Little Auto*. A shortened version of the story: "Mr. Small has a little auto that goes places, and he always gets home safely at the end of the day," covers the same ground, but fails to press out anything essential in Mr. Small's life. It is the balancing of unity and variety, of tension and release, that presses out what is essential in the experience of Mr. Small, who progresses through his day like a Renoir, always moving on, never abruptly altering the flow of his work, like a Picasso, or struggling to make the little auto go, like a Cézanne.

This sense of completeness and fulfilment is vital to *The Little Auto* and, I think, to the art in painting. We get this feeling of peace or fulness by sharing the success of Cézanne's experience with his card players, for example. We share this feeling of the completeness of "The Card Players" to the extent to which we are able to identify where the painting is going, and to go with it. The trip is less demanding in *The Little Auto*, and we see less along the way, but the process is the same.

Again in Barnes' language, we talk about decoration, illustration, and expression in discussing the art in any particular creation. These are handy categories in that thinking process Dr. Barnes chose to call "the objective method." Intensely experiencing a person, an event, a book, or a painting is the only way to interact with outside reality to the fulness of one's present capacity. Thus I adopt his categories in the hope of your sharing my understanding about *The Little Auto*.

Now, I define decoration as the immediate appeal of the language. *The Little Auto's* appeal is in its simplicity. Beyond that, decoration plays a minor role. There is no striving for effects with technique, as in the incredible number of Dr. Seuss copycats. A long series of declarative sentences in

*The Little Auto* is interrupted by: “ ‘Pop!’ Mr. Small has a flat tire.” The simply shaded wash drawings in black and white accented with small blocks of red also have an immediate appeal.

Perhaps in thinking of the illustrative qualities of *The Little Auto*, you think of the pictures, so let me discuss them first. They are an integral part of the story. Their plainness is wedded to the plainness of the words. We see Mr. Small headed for a store, and the text tells us he has parked his car and is going in to buy a newspaper. The illustrations also serve to narrate a part of the story: rather than the writer-illustrator Lois Lenski telling us in words that the little auto is a nifty roadster, we see in the picture that it is. Rather than getting a verbal picture of Mr. Small, we see Mr. Small himself. If presented in words, Mr. Small would not make sense to a child or to an adult. Can you imagine yourself responding to a character whose most pronounced feature is that his body is very small compared with his head size? All sorts of emotional responses would enter into the reading of a story about such an oddly proportioned man. But depicted in drawings, Mr. Small comes across as Mr. Small who has a little red auto. You don't question his authenticity. He's just fine himself.

What is this queer quality of itness that makes a child-man accepted as a universal person in this book? I believe the answer is that when distorting reality makes an experience truer to life than not distorting it, you are involved in art, involved in one person's distilling his or her own experience of being alive at a particular moment so accurately that the observer becomes part of the artist's experience, accepting the artist's version of the interaction with the subject. I should say “the observer *can* become” for the recipient of a visual or verbal image has a choice: he can risk changing himself—his inner feelings—by using his mind and emotions to share the artist's encounter, or he can remain the same and “see” (to use the verb loosely) Cézanne's card players as some men playing poker.

Apart from the pictures, the words of the story—the narration—are illustration in that they tell us what Mr. Small does on this day, which is an obvious point. The



harder question is: Is the narration mere illustration, or is the author an artist-illustrator in words in the sense that Glackens is in lines? That is, are we given a collection of miscellaneous details, or are we given narrative details that have meaning in terms of what the writer experienced and what she is sharing with us of her own seeing? Judgment on the validity of the author's choice of items narrated must be made in terms of the book itself (that is to say, in plastic terms). Does the author use illustration to fulfil her design or not? We must hold off discussing that question until we discuss the author's design.

In this context, I use design to stand for the author's intent in writing this book in the way she did. I find design hard to discuss, since we can only draw tentative conclusions from the author's results, and since it is a fact that the process of putting words in a row affects an author's original design, as applying paint to a flat surface affects a painter's original intent. Which is to say, there wouldn't be much point in asking the author either, since her answer would come after the fact of creation, and, so, she stands at the same place we do, experiencing the result.

Design is really a word for the constantly shifting criterion by which a painter or a writer accepts, rejects, or re-does every brush stroke or word. To the extent that the completed book is the result of Lois Lenski's experience, design means the way in which the artist worked through her inner reality—her memories, her philosophy, her absorption of her life's events—in committing to paper her interaction with the subject.

With these qualifications in mind, I believe Lois Lenski's design was to tell a story of a plain man's simple day in terms every person can relate to. The interaction is important. Right now, my small hound dog is barking at two raccoons and a fox. One raccoon is sitting up begging for food; the fox is settled on one haunch, waiting for the scraps the raccoon will leave from his begging. My dog's design in barking affects not the fox's plan to wait for food. I cite that example because a design or a purpose or a plan must involve interaction with an outside reality, be it a fox or a

child or a buyer of paintings. There is no actual experience in my dog's encounter with the fox.

Once I sent some color slides of my little brother and sister playing in the Gulf of Mexico to a friend living in Liberia's bush country. The slides were shown at a birthday party where the only city person and the only white person present was my friend. The Liberians laughed exuberantly over the children's playing in the waves, diving from my father's shoulders, and running on the sand. When a slide of a water skier appeared on the screen, there was silence. Not a silence of amazement, but a silence of meaninglessness. Design involves lighting upon a means of reaching another person through connecting experiences. The Liberians connected with the playing children easily, for their children love to play too. But they could not connect with the water skier. A man standing on the top of waves had no meaning at all to them.

To carry my thoughts a step further, it is inherent in Lois Lenski's design that a child find in Mr. Small echoes of his own life. A child experiences his own unfolding of a day: waking, waiting for his mother to come to his bed, eating, playing or amusing himself in some way, sleeping—all in a usual order. He also observes with a varying degree of comprehension the unfolding of an adult's day: mother and father go to work, come home, eat. (It is my own observation that small children are not aware that parents sleep.) Perhaps a part of Mr. Small's appeal is in letting the child in on this adult world. The child sees Mr. Small's adult world as his own world, just as he accepts Mr. Small's body as being adult (adorned in a suit), though shaped as a child's body. I see the design as using this unfolding of a day to change the way a child sees his world by making him aware of the unfolding quality of his own day.

The echo is a profound echo, for we each carry forward the traditions of our way of living, by, as small children, imitating in our play what we see adults around us doing. Thus a small child spends time putting gas in his wagon or in a cardboard box or in his tricycle, or in his invisible imagined little auto. In our culture we tend to think of ourselves as unique individuals, which we are, there being only one



Lawrie Hamilton in the vast span of time this planet will have existed as a place in a universe. But we exist in a tradition. Every child learns to live in the ways the people around him live; these are the ways in which we do the things he learns. Mr. Small belongs to every child, or, perhaps, in a broader view, each child belongs to Mr. Small.

So, back to the question: Is the illustrative aspect of *The Little Auto* mere illustration, or is illustration used to achieve the author's design? I answer, Yes, the writer chose details and events that achieve her design. The narration does carry the facts needed to tell us about Mr. Small's day in a way that progresses from a beginning to a middle to an ending.

The narration also lets us know Mr. Small: "Mr. Small has a little Auto. It is red and shiny. He likes to look at it." Already I know Mr. Small is giggly inside himself, as I am. Playfulness is a broad human value—most of us enjoy the emotion evoked in admiring something we have just made bright and shiny. This honest portrayal of Mr. Small draws us into caring about his day.

A sense of rhythm pervades the details. For each halting of the flow, a resolution; for each tension, a release. "A small dog follows the little Auto, but is soon left far behind." I am not sure if you know what I am saying, for my point is one of those things that is so obvious it is often not known. The statement that "a small dog follows the little Auto" is boring. Nothing is changing. There is no movement. It is as if a drummer struck a kettledrum and no sound resulted. The boredom is frustrating to the reader. But tell the result of the dog's following the car, "but is soon left far behind," and the kettledrum sounds. Something has happened. And the fact of a consequence gives the initial happening significance.

The rhythm in "The little Auto goes UP HILL and the little Auto goes DOWN HILL" is blatant, but that is not meant as a criticism, for it is a simplification of the basic rhythm that might connect with a child who does not sense the rhythm elsewhere. Once you are feeling it, the rhythm is everywhere: "a STOP-GO sign"; "The little Auto starts for home. It comes to a red light and waits for

it to turn green.” And even the ending returns us to the beginning: “Soon the little Auto is back in the garage. After it is washed and polished it shines like new.”

But it is expression that is the crux of the matter in the art in painting and the art in writing. I take expression to mean: the “pressing out” of a universally shared experience, of a fragment of life. The most profound knowing of Cézanne’s “The Card Players” rests on expression and all that it means. And I say the same knowing is applicable to *The Little Auto*.

Expression is the result of directness. A devious interaction between a writer with an idea and a piece of paper, between a painter with a subject and color, will result only in a sham. It wouldn’t be worth your time to read my words if they weren’t my pressing out of my experience with Mr. Small.

Miss de Mazia’s “pressing out”<sup>\*</sup> is an accurate choice of words, for expression is forcing one’s interior landscape—all that’s ever happened to me and all my reactions to it—to confront a new experience and record the confrontation. I like what John Dewey says about expression: “What most of us lack in order to be artists is not the inceptive emotion, nor yet merely technical skill in execution. It is the capacity to work a vague idea and emotion over into terms of some definite medium.”<sup>†</sup>

In writing for children, of course, there is no need to stage a pitched battle in your mind between your own life and the life of a character you have decided to call Mr. Small. A clever idea, some onomatopoetic words, and enough copy to fill forty-eight pages will do fine. Except it won’t. Children operate on a direct level. Expression still comes easily to them. “There are few obstructions to be overcome, few wounds to heal, few conflicts to resolve,” as my friend John Dewey says it.<sup>‡</sup> About the Philadelphia zoo in November, a young Spanish-descent black friend of mine wrote: “The peacocks was running all around.”

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<sup>\*</sup> Editor’s note—the origin of this idea is to be found in John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), p. 64.

<sup>†</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>‡</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.



It is Lois Lenski's victory that she addresses children with respect. She is willing to let them in on her honest feelings about being alive, worked through in regard to Mr. Small. I suspect she writes with the ease of a Renoir, which is not to deny the inner work, to use a psychiatric term, either of them did. It is the intimate relationship of design and illustration in *The Little Auto* that makes the book expressive. Fundamentally, it is the flow of the narration from an author whose mind is filled for her own purposes that presses out the essential facts and feelings of Mr. Small's day. Her mind is not empty, nor is it filled with someone else's plan to write such and such for children. It is filled with her own affirmation of life, with her own images of a character, for her own purposes and needs.

Mr. Small ex-presses, presses out, the meaning of the universe in which we live: polish a car and it shines; put in gas and it goes; take a drive and come back to the safety of home. When the universe is not such for a person or a people, we recognize it as tragic. In Mr. Small the chaos of our lives is shaped into a simple rhythm—a simple rhythm of leaving home and coming home again, of tension and release, of beginning and ending that, from my experience of many more years than a child, I know also flows through the whole creation, day and night, summer and winter, my birth and my death, the beginning and the end of the earth and the sun, beyond to the universe.

# Structuralism as an Aesthetic Model

by WILLIAM E. WEBSTER\*

## I. AESTHETIC MODELS

### **Perceptual Sets, Aesthetic Sets and Aesthetic Models.**

The experience, understanding and appreciation of works of art depend upon our acquiring an aesthetic set. An aesthetic set is a particular sub-class of a perceptual set, the function of which is to discriminate, organize and interpret the data which constantly bombard the senses. It is, accordingly, by means of such perceptual sets that we construct meaningful experience out of sensory activity.

To account for an individual's experience, understanding and appreciation of art through aesthetic sets, we employ what is called an aesthetic model.† Originating in the philosophy of Plato, aesthetic models have been constructed, applied and recorded for some 2500 years.

Plato's aesthetic theory (the terms "aesthetic model" and "aesthetic theory" will be used interchangeably) is referred to as a mimetic theory of art. Mimetic theories are those which maintain that art is primarily imitative and representational of nature. This being the case, art is assigned a subordinate position to nature in the hierarchy of things in the world: art is always secondary to and dependent upon the aspect or part of nature being imitated.

For Plato, art is even further removed from natural reality than might be assumed from the above. In the tenth book of *The Republic* he presents his famous example of the bed: the really real Platonic bed is the ideal form "bed," which exists in the Platonic heaven of forms. This bed has no empirical properties; rather, it has all the defining properties which constitute "bedness." Then, on a lower level of reality is the physical bed constructed by the craftsman, which is only an imitation of the form "bedness" in the Platonic heaven. Finally, we have the bed painted by the artist, which is an imitation of that produced by the crafts-

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† Broadly speaking, an aesthetic model may be defined as a systematized answer to the question, "What is a work of art?"



man. Thus, for Plato, the artist is "the imitator in the third generation from nature," and a painting is an imitation of an imitation of reality (*i.e.*, Platonic formal reality).

The conclusion of this appraisal is that art, as imitative, is a very long way from truth. And truth, according to Plato, is of the utmost importance in life. As a result, he takes a very dim view of art generally and of the status of the artist in society. Contending that art destroys the order in man's soul and nurtures the irrational, Plato argues that the artist should be excluded from his ideal society, *The Republic*.\*

As an aesthetic model, what does this theory do? (1) It provides an account of how art is experientially meaningful in terms of reality. (I should, however, mention that, although Plato emphasizes the deceptive side of imitation, this is not a *sine qua non* of all mimetic theories of art.) (2) The theory relegates the artist to a low social position: in terms of reality the artist is beneath the craftsman in status; in terms of freedom the artist should be censored. (3) The theory incorporates art into a general metaphysical model of the world. The order and nature of reality are specified by Plato, and within this order art is given a precise position.

**Dimensions of Aesthetic Models.** The centuries since Plato have produced numerous aesthetic models. Of these there are two primary functional classifications: (1) epistemic models, which provide an account of experience and knowledge with respect to works of art; and (2) metaphysical models, which provide an account of the nature and status of works of art. Some other dimensions of aesthetic models,

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\* So that this theory will not be misrepresented, let me say a few words in Plato's defense. The "irrationality" accusation is directed primarily against the performing arts (drama, poetry and music). What Plato probably had in mind is illustrated in the kind of situation created a few years ago at the rock festival in Altamont. On the whole, his position is more effectively set forth in the delightful dialogue *Ion* than in *The Republic*.

To acquire an understanding of and sympathy for Plato's aesthetic theory, I heartily recommend the film *Gim'me Shelter* (done by the Rolling Stones). The psychological tenor of this Dionysian extravaganza, cast in a context of sensual music, is far from alien to the society in which Plato lived. Seeing how one can be virtually controlled by such music, and how it can contribute to an orgiastic situation, suggests the advisability of censorship in a very compelling way. If music is the cause, or even the catalyst, of an irrationality that can have socially destructive consequences (murder, rape or rioting), then ought not such music be controlled or censored?

philosophically subordinate to the aforementioned, are those directed to the psychological, social, political and ethical value or relevance of art. If these could be generally summarized, we might say that they extend from a perspective based on idealism such as Plato's (where the meaning and reality of the work are said to be contained in some idea or ideal that is independent of the art object itself) to empiricism (where all and only relevant features of the work are said to be contained in the phenomenally presented object).

In addition to the general positions of idealism and empiricism, there are approaches to aesthetic discrimination which emphasize conditions of the perceiver and the importance of features extrinsic to the work, *e.g.*, facts of the artist's life and intentions. Naturally, these also could have metaphysical correlates pertaining to artistic reality.

## II. AESTHETIC MODEL OF BARNES\*

It would not only be difficult but impractical to construct an all-inclusive aesthetic model—that is, one which comprehends every dimension named above. Most models concentrate on one of the dimensions, and that one is generally the epistemic: if a theory can provide a satisfactory account of our experience, understanding and appreciation of works of art, it is generally held to be successful. In this category, of particular interest is the aesthetic model provided by Albert C. Barnes, wherein the work of art is viewed essentially as a phenomenally present entity in its own right, the significance of which is to be accounted for in terms of the notion of plastic form as a means of expressing broad human values.† Thus we may say that, for Barnes, phenomenal

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\* For a fuller discussion of Barnes' philosophy of aesthetics, see Violette de Mazia, "Aesthetic Quality," *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, Vol. II, No. 1, (Spring, 1971), The Barnes Foundation Press, Merion, Pa., pp. 3-27.

† Barnes' model was developed as a result of applying the scientific method of thought to the problem of arriving at legitimate aesthetic judgment. Very roughly, scientific method consists in: (1) formulating a hypothesis; (2) testing the hypothesis in experience; (3) if it is not falsified by experience, then accepting the hypothesis as being probable, in whatever degree; and, finally, (4) constructing a theory on the basis of the established hypothesis to account for the data.



properties constitute the sole criterion for judgment of aesthetic merit.

**What are Phenomenal Properties?** Basically, phenomenal properties are those perceptual properties which can be experienced through the five senses. In painting the main concern is with visual phenomena—specifically, the color properties, textural properties, dimensional properties and relational properties. It is, of course, a physical impossibility that every one of a painting's phenomenal properties be perceived at a single time, or that every one be perceived from the same position; it is, indeed, likely that *all* of the phenomenal properties are never perceived, but this is precisely the basis for the open-ended variety that exists in the interpretation of works of art.

Moreover, in the strict sense, the phenomenal properties of a work of art are constantly changing. In most cases, we disregard this change because it is imperceptible during a single observation of a work, or even between times of observation. This changeability of phenomenal properties, however, is not simply an academic point: consider the gradual degeneration of the frescoes of Giotto and the fact that the same Bach score performed today sounds a whole-tone higher than it did at the time it was written.

Thus, the important features of phenomenal properties are: (1) that the possible phenomenal properties perceivable at any one time are virtually unlimited; and (2) that the phenomenal properties are constantly changing. The second is aesthetically relevant, at least in an historical context.

What reason is there, then, for using, as Barnes does, its phenomenal properties as the sole criterion for investigating the aesthetic meaning of a work of art? (1) Description of works of art in terms of phenomenal properties can be objective. By this I mean only that they can be as objective as anything else we can describe or translate into meaningful, generally acceptable verbal terms. This is because there are linguistic conventions and certain assumed consistencies about the nature of the perceptual world which lead us to believe in the possibility of formulating a description that is communicative among human beings and verifiable when the object described is consulted. (2) Phenomenal proper-

ties provide a criterion for comparing, contrasting, evaluating and criticizing works of art. The activity of comparing and contrasting is, furthermore, basically descriptive in nature, hence, fairly uncontroversial. However, evaluating and criticizing works of art depend on assumptions which are not directly verifiable, but can only be supported by an appeal to the common experience of mankind.

**Plastic Form and Aesthetic Formalism.** Plastic form refers to the set of relations holding among a set of plastic elements. A plastic element can be characterized as a phenomenal property (*e.g.*, color, light, line, space) realized in a particular medium (*e.g.*, oils).

The concept of "plasticity" suggests the creative process of molding, working and changing the physical material that constitutes the medium of an art. In this sense the material used (*e.g.*, clay, oil, acrylic or stone) may be thought to have a reality underlying its phenomenal properties.\* Thus, as a plastic element is one of a set of phenomenal properties, so plastic form is a complex set of phenomenal properties from the point of view of the relations holding among them.

A criterion for the understanding of art based on the concept of plastic form may be designated as "formalism." I take the term "formalism" in aesthetics simply to mean the theory which asserts that only those properties of a work of art which are phenomenally present are aesthetically relevant.†

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\* Actually, however, this additional reality need not be predicated, nor is such predication justifiable; rather, reference to the medium offers a simple, shorthand method for talking about a certain set of phenomenal properties determined by a specific medium, as, for example, the color and textural properties of oil. Talk couched in the language of the medium, then, facilitates discussion of both the productive activity of the artist and the experiential activity of the perceiver, but it is acceptable only so long as we understand that what is meant is nothing more than the appropriate set of phenomenal properties.

† It is not to the point of this essay whether a particular value-criterion for works of art is defensible. We might note, however, that any such criterion is most easily understandable in terms of phenomenal properties. Indeed, one might assert that a criterion is understandable *only* in phenomenal terms. For example, consider the judgment, "'Guernica' is a great painting because it expresses the spirit of the Spanish War": if expressing such a spirit is a condition, in any way, of a picture's greatness, then our knowing that it is great will forever be beyond our grasp unless we can muster some phenomenal evidence of the fact that "x expresses the spirit of y."



Aesthetic formalism is similar to science to the extent that it ultimately depends on empirical phenomena for its conclusions. It is, however, unlike science in that it does not use the method of hypothesis. The relationship between science and the experience of art in terms of empirical phenomena is interesting: in science the phenomena are subordinate to the problem to be solved, while, in the experience of art, phenomena are primary or directly related to what is primary.\*

### III. STRUCTURALISM

The Barnes model is of interest not only because of its particular development in the educational program at The Barnes Foundation, but also because of a general acceptance and power that it has enjoyed in recent years. The main line of argument against this aesthetic model asserts that there are a great many properties which are relevant to the understanding of a work of art which Barnes would exclude from consideration. Recently, this kind of criticism was formulated and an alternative aesthetic model proposed. The resulting model is named "structuralism," and its application to works of art is presented in *The Structure of Art* by Jack Burnham.<sup>1†</sup>

Since the beginning of the century, structuralism has been employed as an explanatory theory in the areas of linguistics, anthropology, psychology, psychiatry and literature, with varying degree of success. It is, then, not surprising to see the formulation of a structural aesthetics directed towards the plastic arts. In his attempt, Burnham introduces some interesting points, particularly concerning the phenomenon of a series of paintings and the significance of cultural milieu and ideological tenor in understanding the artist's work.

I shall briefly summarize the general theory of structuralism and then indicate how Burnham tries to apply this

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\* See also Ellen Homsey, "Science and Art," *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, *ibid.*, pp. 82-94.

† References for numbered footnotes appear at the end of this article, p. 82.

theory to aesthetics. In the final section, I shall criticize Burnham's structuralism.

**The Meaning of Structuralism.** Structuralism has been defined variously as method, process, function and form. In many discussions one receives the impression that "structure" is taken to mean something similar to the classical notion of essence—*i.e.*, that by which an independent thing is what it is.

On the basis of the way that the term structuralism has been systematically employed since the beginning of the twentieth century, we may attempt summarily to characterize its general implications as follows:

(1) Structuralism is an explanation of mind. It is an analytic technique by means of which the true nature of the subconscious human mind will be understood. (By "subconscious" I mean the entire dimension of mind that is other than, or lies beneath, the conscious mind.) The proponents of this viewpoint assert that analysis can reveal underlying structures in intellectual disciplines (*e.g.*, mathematics, linguistics, psychology and anthropology) and that the structures of these disciplines will be found to be isomorphic with the structure of the subconscious mind.

(2) Structuralism is an epistemological theory. In essence, it asserts that we know S (any subject) when we have acquired the structure of S to the extent that we can use it. One field to which it has been applied rather thoroughly is the study of language; of interest is the fact, made quite clear by Claude Levi-Strauss, that we need not be directly aware of the structure of verbal communication, nor need we be able to state any rules pertaining to it, in order to use it correctly and effectively.

(3) Structuralism provides the semantic dimension for S. What language, as our explanatory example, means is revealed in and by its structure. The first-level empirical data of S may be inconsistent or may even appear to be contradictory; the structure provides the rules by which these data are shown to be consistent. This will be considered below.

(4) Structures are metaphysical foundations. While no one has explicitly formulated a metaphysical structuralism,



the supposition is that there is reality underlying the subject in question, and this reality is Structure.

(5) Structuralism is a “theoretic-analytic” (or explanatory) concept. The notion of structure is comparable to a theoretic entity in the statement of scientific laws. Those scientific explanations that are successful exhibit, or are isomorphic with, the structure of reality.

**Internal Organization.** It is the last notion of structuralism that seems to be of primary relevance in Burnham’s effort to construct an aesthetic model. Structural explanations of phenomena (things or states of affairs) differ from other kinds of explanation in that structuralism emphasizes the internal organization or structure as the crucial explanatory factor. Structuralism in language, for example, seeks to display the internal order of language, by means of which one is able to explain linguistic phenomena. Such a phenomenon in every language is that there is a finite vocabulary, a finite set of rules for the construction of meaningful sentences, and yet there is an infinite number of meaningful sentences that can be constructed; Noam Chomsky, among other linguists, believes that the structure of language will provide the rules for this fact. Likewise, language theorists search for rules to account for particular instances of usage—*e.g.*, the rule that “a transitive verb necessitates an object.” At a high level of theoretic inquiry, Chomsky is searching for a rule that will account for the generation of new sentences that are syntactically correct and meaningful.

As I have characterized it, formalism can not be used for the analysis of the syntax of language; the syntax of language has its foundations in rules that are similar to the rules of reason underpinning all the formal sciences (mathematics, geometry, etc.), and the relation between linguistic rules and the sentences to which they apply is one based on logic, not on sensory data. Recall, in contrast to this, that the crucial *explanatory* factor for the formalists is description based on phenomenal properties and that all properties of a work of art which are aesthetically relevant for the formalists are phenomenal properties.

In anthropology, the structuralists seek to find an inherent structure in social relations (and other cultural phenomena)

which explains the various social systems and the nature of man. An example of this is to be found in the massive work of Claude Levi-Strauss on the nature of myth<sup>2</sup>; by revealing the structure of myth in societies of South American Indians, Levi-Strauss hoped to find the psychological and cultural function of myth and to show that its general nature and function are consistent among particular myths which on the surface appear to be very different and even incompatible.\*

#### IV. AESTHETIC STRUCTURALISM

Before examining the specifics of Burnham's adaptation of the method of structuralism as described above, we might first give an idea of his response to the question, "What is a work of art?" The answer implied by Burnham's analyses is: the work is a universe unto itself.

According to Burnham, the work of art, to be understood, must be considered in all its aspects. As such, it is analogous to a person as a whole, as opposed to the work considered simply as a phenomenal object, which is comparable merely to the physical (or phenomenal) person. In Burnham's sense, the phenomenally present individual is little more than the shell of the total person, who also possesses an historical dimension and whose genesis, whose social, ethnic, cultural nature and entire psychological complex are important to his definition, as is the entire area of his productive, creative and ideological being.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this analogy:

(a) The multi-dimensional nature of a person is all that it is independent of analysis; however, if one wishes to know (or to analyze) the nature of a person, he is obliged by the dictates of the empirical method and theoretic completeness to include the properties indicated. Thus, our brief sketch is a model for the analysis of the nature of a person which can be applied by anyone. In no case is a particular analysis unique (with respect to the individual analyzed), nor is it exhaustive.

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\* However, structural anthropology as formulated by Levi-Strauss falls into grave difficulty because it fails to maintain the logical/empirical distinction cited above, and Edmund Leach soundly criticizes Levi-Strauss for violating scientific method. According to Leach,<sup>3</sup> Levi-Strauss first constructs a logical system, then literally bends the empirical data to conform to his *a priori* schema. Hence, even if the logic is superb, the science is suspect.



(b) The phenomenal object (*e.g.*, John Doe) holds a definite position of priority in this analytic structure: we believe, and correctly so, that all relevant dimensions of the person John Doe are contained within (at least, metaphorically) and are directly related to the physical (phenomenal) object John Doe. While there is no end of information and knowledge obtainable about a person, *e.g.*, his biography, his creations, his philosophies and even his complete medical history, this body of information will be relatively incomplete in the absence of direct knowledge of the phenomenal object. We can know that a certain person, Stravinsky, composed "The Rite of Spring," we can know the work and know that the composer was not necessarily the best conductor of his own works, etc.; however, our knowledge of the person Stravinsky would be incomplete had we never met the man directly.

Thus, Burnham is telling us that the answer to the question "What is a work of art?" is equivalent to the answer to the question "What is a person?"

It is likely that the phenomenal object of art is more important to its universe as a whole than is the man to his, but this distinction seems to be purely academic. Works of art are multi-dimensional entities, as are people; and, just as the direct phenomenal experience is a necessary condition for the complete knowledge of either, so, too, is a cognizance and understanding of the non-phenomenal dimensions. For Burnham, this is precisely what his structuralism is intended to do: *i.e.*, to distinguish and specify the dimensions; to show how they are related to one another; and to provide a criterion of meaningfulness for works of art in general which is applicable to individual works.

**Binary Classification System.** The structuralists in art want to find an internal organization to provide an explanation for the diverse phenomena of the field, be they multiplicity of genre, change through history or ideological diversity. Therefore, aesthetic structuralism not only adopted the general claim that there is an inherent structure in art as a whole; it also adopted the manner in which structuralists like de Saussure, Barthes and Levi-Strauss tried to describe the structure of their respective subjects. One of

the methods by which these French structuralists attempted to organize the matter of their particular fields was to set up systems of categories which were meant to be exclusive and exhaustive; then all of the subject matter was classified as belonging to one of these exclusive categories. This I take to be what is meant by the term "binary classification system." According to it, there is a set of pairs of exclusive and exhaustive categories—*e.g.*, one pair in the set might be "natural/cultural," accompanied by the contention that all of the subject matter within a given field of study is classifiable as either natural or cultural and that no part of the subject matter can be both. In addition to this kind of distinction, there is a vertical hierarchy of these categorical pairs: for Levi-Strauss the natural/cultural pair is a high-level pair, under which other pairs may be grouped. This notion is important in the construction of Burnham's structuralism.

**Burnham.** As noted earlier, Burnham adopts not only the general classificatory system of linguistics and anthropology, but attempts to incorporate into his theory much of the substructure as well. In his *The Structure of Art*, the overseeing category is the natural/cultural pair cited above, under which, following the Levi-Strauss system, he transfers and extends the meanings of such pairs of terms as "signified/signifier" (the pair which, in linguistics, distinguishes a term or word from its meaning), "synchronic/diachronic" (the former referring to the state of a particular linguistic system at one time, the latter to an historic continuum), "syntagmatic/paradigmatic" (the former referring to verbal meaning dependent on sentential context, the latter to meaning independent of context), and so on. The analogical transfer of these pairs from linguistics to aesthetics is obviously possible, as will be demonstrated below.

In applying the sets of pairs to works of art, Burnham's intent seems to be twofold: (1) to classify the relevant distinguishable features of such works; and (2), by using these pairs in relation to one another, to arrive at a theory of art or an aesthetic model. How he uses them is best shown in the following analysis reproduced directly from his book:



PIET MONDRIAN: *Composition 2 (1922)\**

	natural	cultural
(real system)	<p>The plastic elements (color, line, texture, composition, and other signifiers) of optical appearances which compose Renaissance realism</p>	<p>Between 1905 and 1921 Mondrian systematically separates and distills the plastic elements of painting, omitting such things as natural color, perspective, shading, and subjective content; Mondrian chooses horizontal and vertical black lines of variable widths because of their oppositional force within the normal picture plane; Mondrian selects the primary triad of red, yellow, and blue as color reduced to its most essential form, representing the "objects" of reality</p>
	<p>Mondrian constructs a painting by composing the above plastic principles on a white ground (he emphasizes the temporal act of painting by the use of overlapping black lines and overpainted areas of color)</p>	
(system of articulation)	<p>A Neo-Plastic painting</p>	<p><i>Equivalency between plastic elements which "creates dynamic equilibrium and reveals the true content of reality" (Mondrian, p. 53) is the "content" of this painting</i></p>
(system of rhetoric)	<p><i>Mondrian's many essays about his painting</i></p>	<p>Neo-Plasticism as a further step toward merging art and reality</p>

[Marginal parentheses mine]

\* See Plate 32.

The final paragraph of Burnham’s commentary on this Mondrian follows, as do his “Natural-Cultural structural equations.”

Structurally the over/under relationships of Mondrian’s paintings are very clearly articulated in the artist’s writings and technical decisions. Moreover, it is this degree of clarity which makes Mondrian’s painting so highly valued as art.

<i>EMPIRICAL</i>		<i>ESTHETIC</i>	
(natu- ral)	The pictorial elements of Renaissance realism	The equivalency or pure plastic relationships	(natu- ral)
(cultu- ral)	Reduction of pictorial elements to their pure plastic equivalents	A pure plastic painting as a three-dimensional object	(cultu- ral)
(natural)	Reality	Pure plasticism	(natural)
(cultural)	Pure plasticism	Reality	(cultural)

[Marginal parentheses mine.]

As his specific analyses reveal, Burnham attempts to capture not only the inherent properties of the subject matter of art, but also the relation between the artist and his work, the artist and his environment, the artist and his ideals and the relation among the artist’s different works.

Burnham’s aesthetic theory is, then, simply an application to art of the general theory of structuralism that he found in linguistics and anthropology. However, it is evident from the outset that the terms as used by him have changed their meanings, though it is not clear exactly how they have changed.

The question justifiably arises—if this theory was transferred from linguistics and anthropology, what reason is there to believe that it is or could be a legitimate aesthetic theory? Burnham’s answer rests on the fact that he believes that a work of art has a certain function to serve. He explains this function in terms of the categories mentioned

\* Burnham asserts that the ≈ sign means conceptual, not mechanical, equivalency.



(*i.e.*, natural/cultural and empirical/aesthetic): art *mediates* between a physical reality and an aesthetic ideal. Thus, functionally, art is analogous to both myth and religion, and this analogy provides another correlation to the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss.\*

To place this analysis in the proper perspective, we might consider briefly the direction and dimensions of a formalist analysis of the same work, reviewing the phenomenal properties in a hierarchy that begins with the specific and goes toward the general: the Mondrian, like all paintings, consists of patches of color, each of which may be described in terms of its hue, saturation and intensity. The other basic phenomenal properties include texture, the dimensional aspects of the patches (size and shape) and their spatial character (two- and/or three-dimensionality).

The next level of the formalist hierarchy involves analysis of the relationships between these basic properties—the effect of color on an environment as against that of the same color in isolation and the effect of the textural variations in the picture context.

Following consideration of the preceding, and the relationships between them, the concepts of design, form and composition can be introduced. These include relations between such elements as line (which concerns transition or modulation between color patches), how volume is accomplished, how the space is constructed, figure/ground distinction and, finally, organizational properties pertaining to the work as a whole.

Applying this very rough outline to the Mondrian, we can note to what extent a formalist analysis depends upon direct consideration of the work itself: we cannot verbally make the subtle distinctions for each color patch our eye is capable of perceiving; as a matter of fact, we cannot even verbally distinguish or identify the colors, nor can the basic relational distinctions be made without the clarification of sensuous evidence. In the presence of the work itself, however, we

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\* It could be argued that, with this approach, much of what is said does not require any consultation of the artist's work, and that which does can, for the most part, be as satisfactorily demonstrated with a reproduction as with the work itself.

could, presumably, provide an extensive analysis based entirely on the phenomenal properties.

## V. CRITICISMS

**Subject Matter of Aesthetics.** The primary criticism put forth by the structuralists against the formalism of Barnes is that there are more properties which should be viewed as aesthetically relevant to a work of art than the formalists allow. Now that the structuralists have constructed a model, the obvious question is, what properties do they consider relevant to the aesthetic character of a work of art? Or, to put it another way, what kinds of properties do they conceive as germane to aesthetic understanding?

The kinds of properties must include some that are outside the work itself, since that contention was the basis of the structuralists' criticism of the formalists. The question then becomes, how much is to be allowed into consideration and what is to be used as a criterion for determining the boundaries or limits of the subject matter of aesthetics?

In addition to the work itself, it is clear that in the structuralist approach factors that belong to society are to be included, as well as factors that belong to external reality independent of the work and society, such as the psychological makeup of the artist, his personal history, and so on. Thus, for example, in a structuralist analysis of Gauguin's "The Spirit of the Dead Watching" Burnham asserts that such social factors as "myth," "death," "sexuality" and "lust" would have to be considered; again, analysis of the work of Duchamp-Villon would entail evaluating the artist's statement that "the horse is the archetypal representation of the shift from animal power to machine power" (from *The Great Horse*); likewise, the concept of "mass-produced objects" is central to the analysis of Duchamp's "*Boîte-en-Valise*," as is the fact of Klee's "painting on the theme of marital relationships with the loaded title, 'Dance, Monster to my Soft Song'."

Burnham's examples of what the structuralist must concern himself with from external reality are numerous: woman and bicycle for De Kooning's "Woman and Bicycle";



two Ballantine beer cans for a Jasper Johns; train, bridge and rain for Turner's "Rain, Steam and Speed"; media photographs of famous people for Warhol's works. It is, however, important to recognize that what Burnham is referring to in each of these examples is the physical reality represented by the work, not the concept or the subject matter of the work *per se*.

It is clear that the factors with respect to the artist's life and his psychological nature are also viewed by Burnham as aesthetically relevant to the work; the same is true of the subject of his paintings. But this opens a Pandora's box: is it relevant that the model is the artist's mother? Then, is it relevant to ascertain what the model had for breakfast? Are aspects of her life, background and family relevant? Her husband's family? And so forth, *ad infinitum*. Thus, in the effort to extend the subject matter of art as defined by formalism, structuralism has not only abandoned the picture itself, but has, in addition, simply left art with no determinate subject matter at all.

What effect has Burnham's explication had on the use of a structural approach to the study of art? Presumably, the key notion of structure as a theory of explanation is analysis of the internal structure and, especially, not the apparent structure. This is the distinction made in linguistics between deep structure and surface structure. This distinction appears to have come directly from Noam Chomsky,<sup>5</sup> but Burnham's interpretation of his source seems incorrect when he asserts: "Chomsky regards Saussurian analysis and all subsequent structural analyses as 'surface structure' investigation, while the actual operations of the mind produce mechanisms of 'deep structure' based on logically generative principles insuring creative use of language." This reading of Chomsky implies that "deep structure" has not been employed in structural analysis and that, as a matter of fact, it may be inaccessible. Burnham concludes the section on Chomsky: "Even though we are dealing with 'surface structure,' it is a structure exposing and transcending the present capabilities of descriptive formal analysis."

However, the linguist John Lyons interprets Chomsky

somewhat differently. Lyons shows how Chomsky used these terms technically:

We may note . . . the distinction between the “logical” (deep structure) and “grammatical” (surface structure) subject of a sentence. . . . For example, in the sentence *John was persuaded by Henry to take up golf*, the grammatical subject is *John*. . . . But the deep structure of this sentence consists of one sentence ( $S_2$  [*John take up golf*]) embedded within another ( $S_1$  [*Harry persuaded John (to) take up golf*]); and each sentence has its own logical subject.<sup>6</sup>

Further, Chomsky states, it is only in the deep structure that sentential ambiguity can be disambiguated. His famous example is “Flying planes can be dangerous.” The deep structure shows that both “the act of flying” and “planes while flying” can be taken as the logical subject of the sentence.

Chomsky’s text itself provides no reason to question Lyon’s interpretation. Now, returning to Burnham’s application of this distinction to art, we have a twofold problem: (1) Burnham seems to have misinterpreted how deep structure/surface structure is used by Chomsky; therefore, what Chomsky says and means loses its effectiveness in reading Burnham; and (2) Burnham provides no criterion for this distinction independent of his reference to Chomsky.

If we grant Burnham that we are only “dealing with ‘surface structure,’ ” the question is still before us: of what does the surface structure consist—the work itself, society, the artist’s psychological state or physical reality? But more important, it is simply false that Burnham is dealing only with “surface structure,” given any notion we have of this term. Consequently, Burnham leaves us in a state of confusion.

**Begs the Question.** Burnham’s attack upon formalism begs the question. That there are relevant aesthetic properties of a work in addition to its formal properties is simply asserted by Burnham; the claim is neither justified by argument nor is it provided content by means of a criterion. For an aesthetic model to have significance the question



must be answered: what properties are aesthetically relevant properties of a work?

Barnes would readily admit that there is a virtually infinite number of properties that every work of art has, *e.g.*, such properties as the age and chemical makeup of the canvas and whether the canvas had been used before. However, Barnes leaves no doubt that properties of this nature are not relevant to the work as art. Burnham's structuralism, on the other hand, does not make the distinction between aesthetically relevant and irrelevant properties of a work. And I believe Burnham would admit the absurdity of asserting potential aesthetic relevance to every property of a painting.

**Natural/Cultural?** There is also something wrong with Burnham's simply assuming that these exclusive and exhaustive categories can incorporate all relevant properties of a work of art. If the categories are related to each other as, for instance, are the categories "red" to "blue," rather than "red" to "non-red," then it will be perfectly obvious that there will be properties that will be included in neither the category "red" nor the category "blue," *e.g.*, yellow; if, however, the categories refer to the admittedly exclusive states of "red/non-red," then indeed yellow will be captured as "non-red." Applied to Burnham's theory, if "cultural" means only "non-natural," then "cultural" does not mean anything except the class of properties that are not natural. Further, the need still remains for a criterion to determine what natural properties are: there is no evident reason why a given property should be classified as natural rather than cultural. (In fact, as one compares the analysis of one painting to another, Burnham does not even seem to be consistent in using these classifications.<sup>7</sup>) Thus, there seems to be no explanatory help provided by this classificatory system.

The nonphenomenal properties of a work of art are theoretically relevant only if they can be accounted for under the proposed theory, and, as I have indicated, Burnham's structuralism clearly fails to do so. We must, therefore, conclude that while Burnham offers us some art history, psychology, history of ideas, etc., his structuralism is merely a schematic shell and does not account for our experience,

understanding and appreciation of art, nor does it justify or explain the contention that art functions as the mediation between physical reality and an aesthetic ideal. Therefore, Burnham has failed to provide a satisfactory aesthetic model and has constructed no significant alternative to formalism.

#### NOTES

1. Jack Burnham, *The Structure of Art*, (New York: George Braziller, Inc.), 1971.
2. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked (Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I)*, (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.), 1970.
3. Edmund Leach, *Claude Levi-Strauss*, (New York: The Viking Press, Inc.), 1970.
4. Burnham, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-91.
5. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.), 1968.
6. John Lyons, *Noam Chomsky*, (New York: The Viking Press, Inc.), 1970, p. 89.
7. Consider the analysis of Duchamp's *Fountain* (Burnham, p. 83): under the category "natural" we find—(1) "The series of . . . urinals," (2) particular objects and (3) "Description of the circumstances . . ."; under "cultural"—(1) "A urinal is chosen . . .," (2) "An art gallery . . . ; 'Fountain' (title); an abstract sculpture," (3) "The concept of art" and (4) "Art as illogical and nonsensical." I fail to see the logic that distinguishes this set of properties into natural and cultural; and I see no reason why, in most cases, the property could not have been placed in the other category. In the Malevich analysis (p. 86) and the Mondrian analysis (p. 88) we find formal properties listed in both the natural and cultural categories.



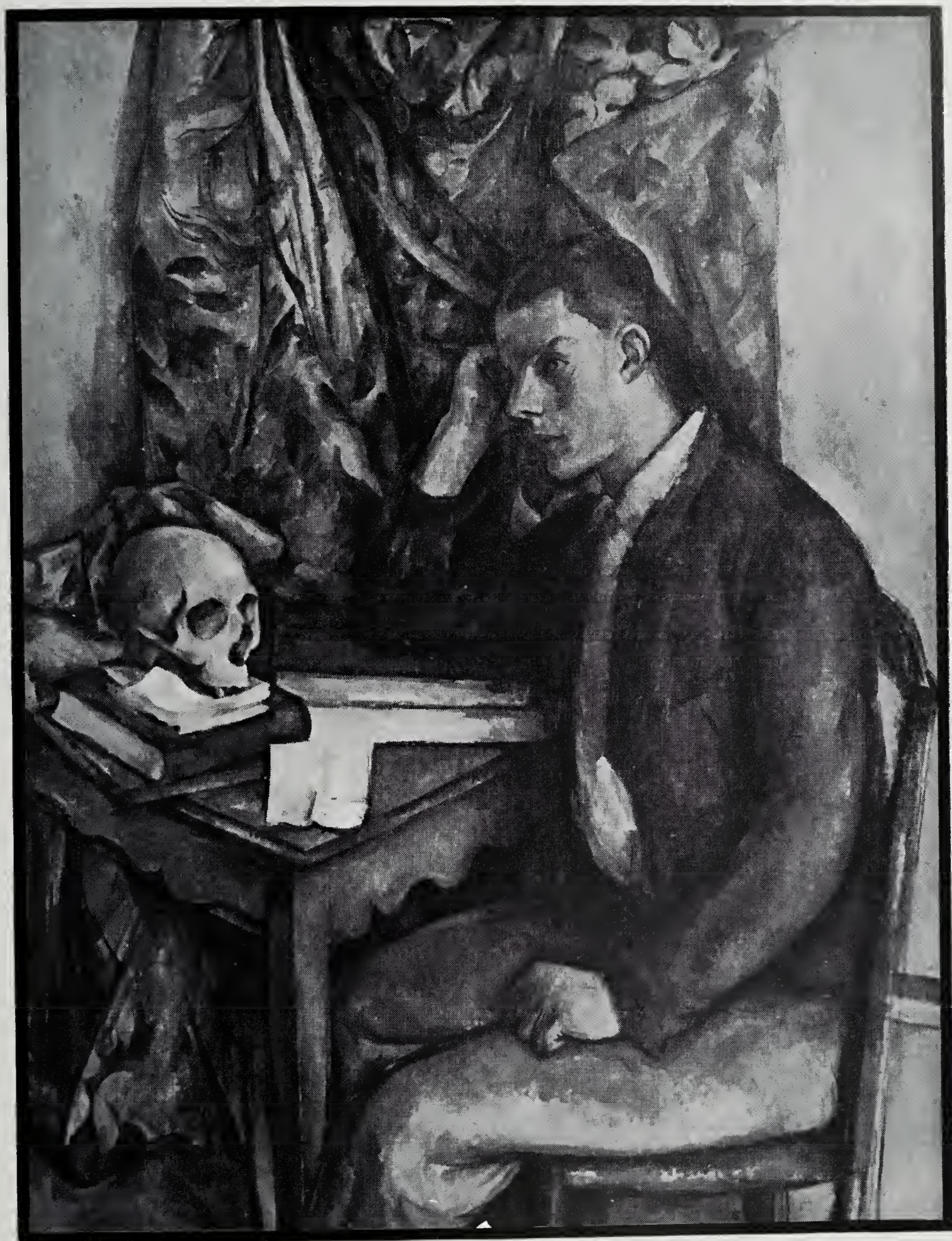
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Cézanne

*Man and Skull*





Rembrandt

*Self-Portrait*  
(Copyrighted by The Frick Collection, New York)





Titian

*Pietro Aretino*  
(Copyrighted by The Frick Collection, New York)





Raphael

Detail from *Parnassus*  
(Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican, Rome)  
(Photograph—Vatican, Rome)





Michelangelo

Detail from *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*  
(Paolina Chapel, Vatican, Rome)  
(Photograph—Vatican, Rome)





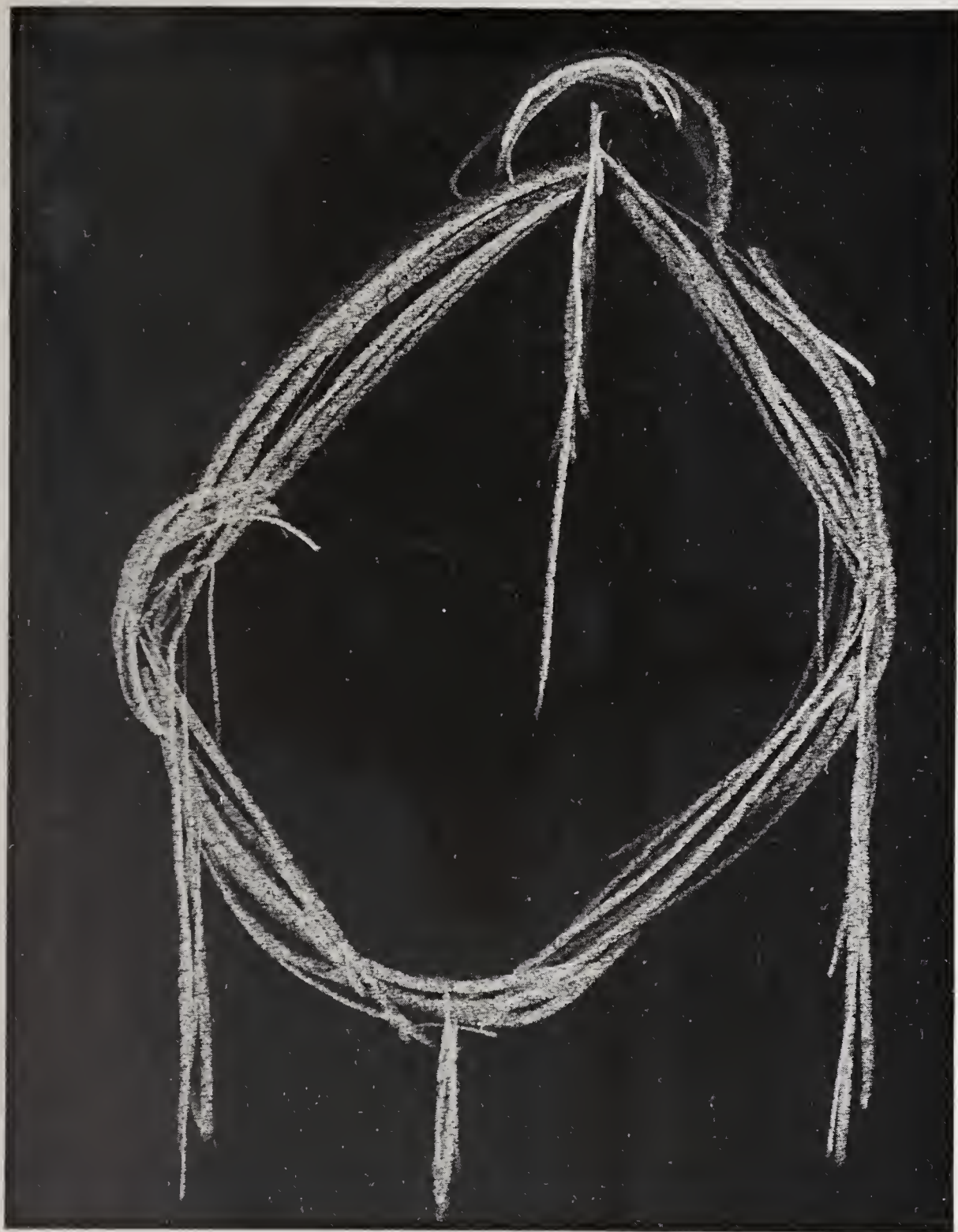
Titian

*Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle*  
(Nelson Gallery—Atkins Museum,  
Kansas City, Missouri. Nelson Fund)



FOLD-OUT

PLATE 7



Diagram—Sweep and Cube Formation in Titian *Man and Son* (Plate 8)

PLATE 8

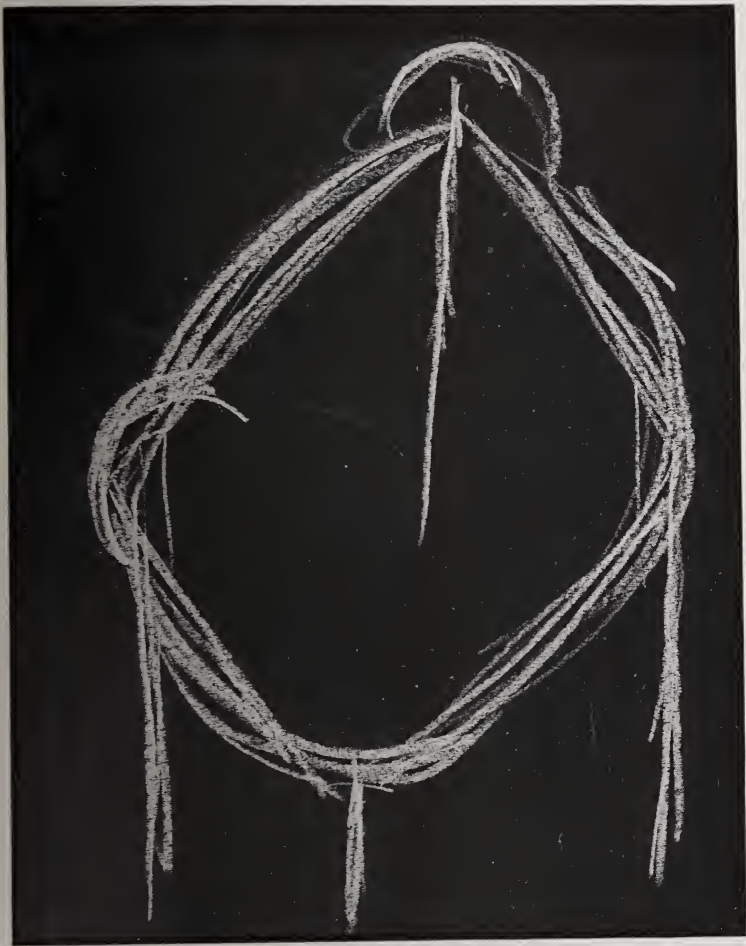


Titian

*Man and Son*



PLATE 7



Diagram—Sweep and Cube Formation in Titian *Man and Son* (Plate 8)

PLATE 8



Titian

*Man and Son*









Raphael

*The Marriage of the Virgin*  
(Pinacoteca, Brera Museum, Milan)





Titian

*Lavinia*  
(Nationalgalerie, Berlin)





Courbet

*Woman with Doves*





Ghirlandaio

*Francesco Sassetti and his Son Teodoro*  
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York—  
The Jules S. Eache Collection, 1949)





Botticelli

*The Madonna and Child of the Eucharist*  
(The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston)





Circle of Tintoretto

*A Venetian Procurator*  
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FOLD-OUT

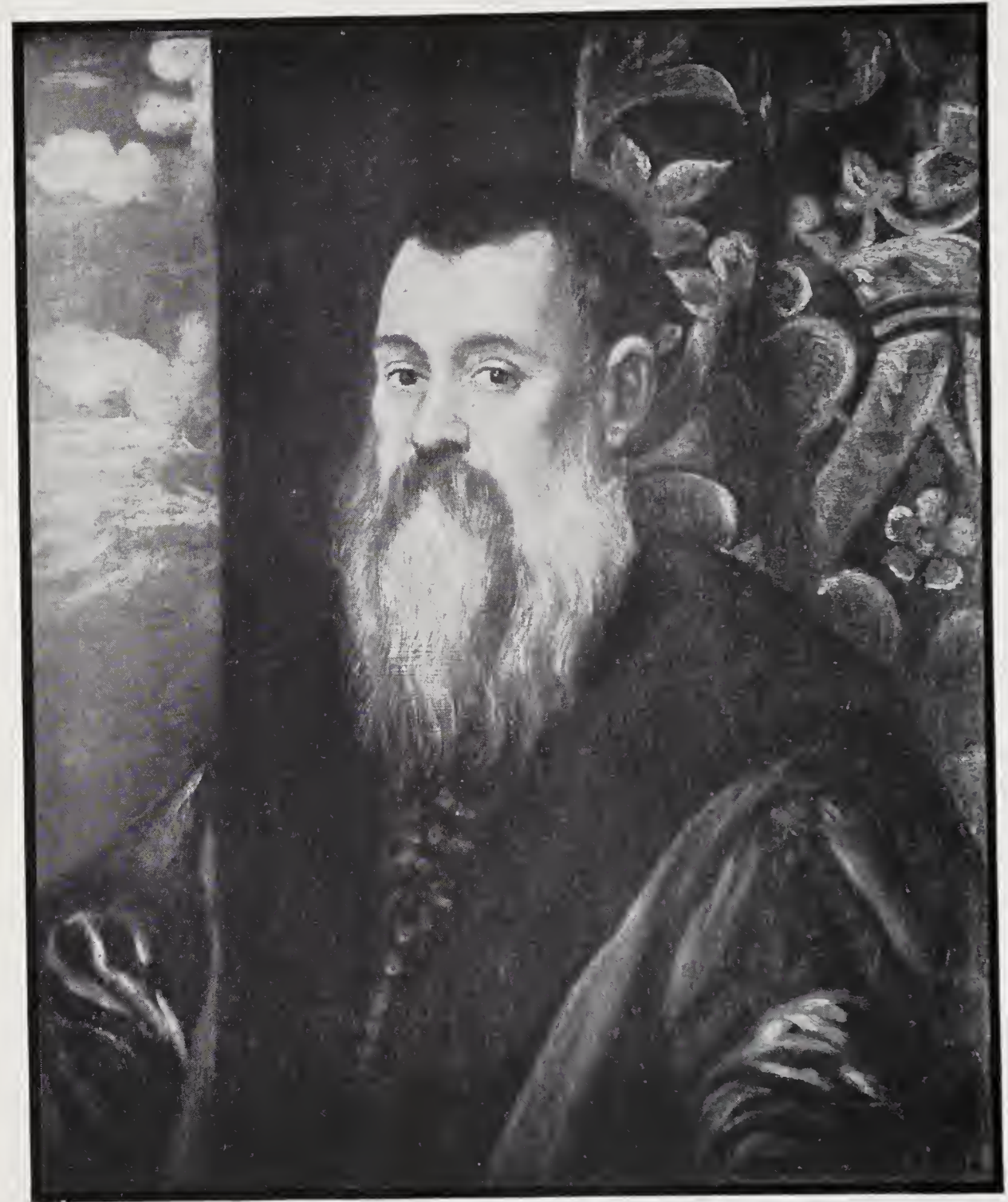
PLATE 16



Cézanne

*Boy in Red Vest*

PLATE 17



Tintoretto

*A Venetian Senator*



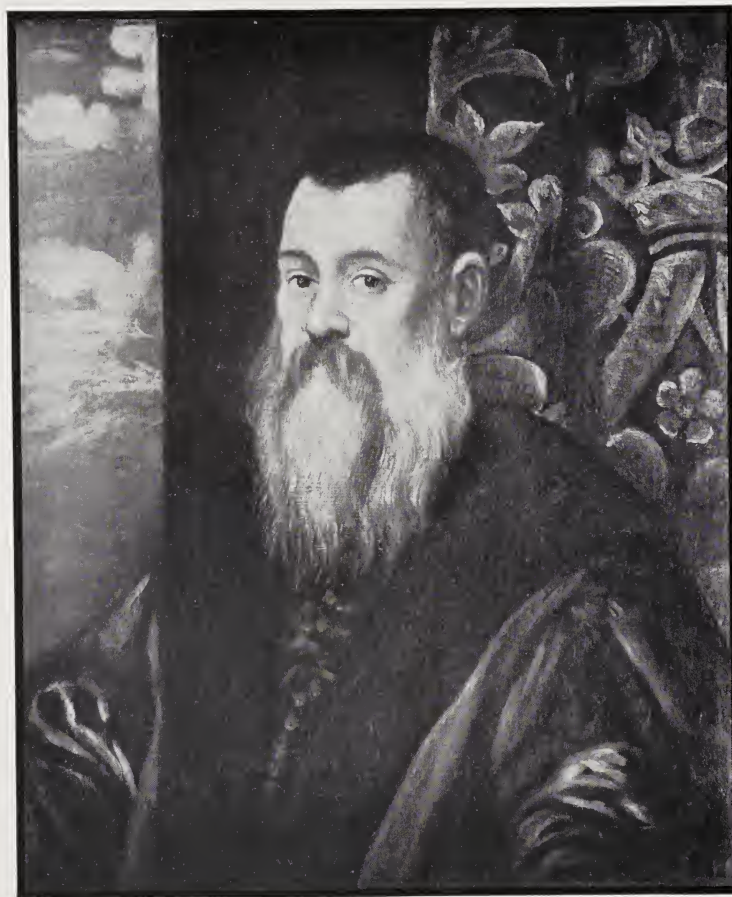
PLATE 16



Cézanne

*Boy in Red Vest*

PLATE 17



Tintoretto

*A Venetian Senator*





Goya

*Don Manuel Osorio as a Child*  
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York—  
The Jules S. Bache Collection, 1949)





Tintoretto

*A Venetian Nobleman*  
(The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo)

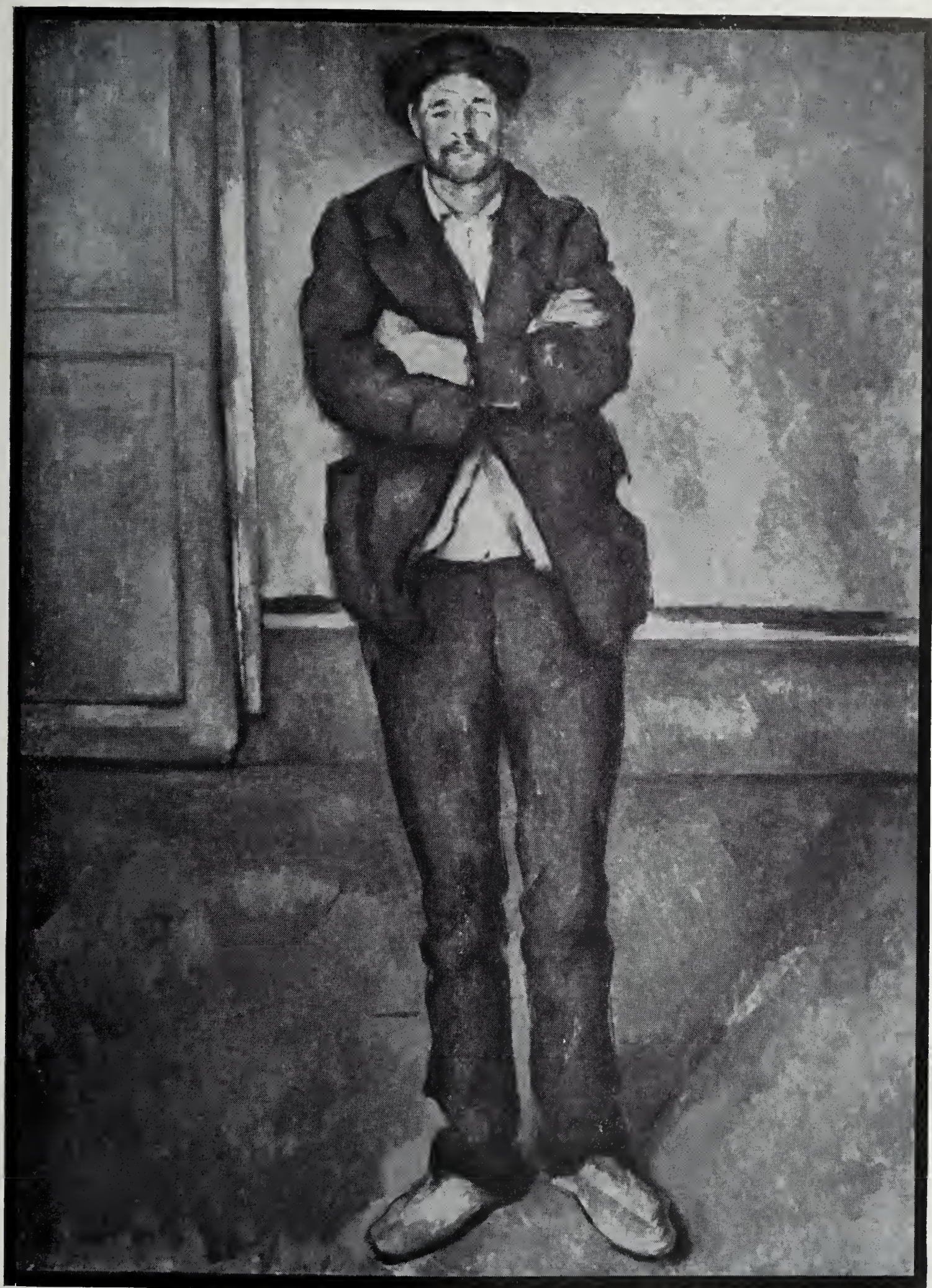




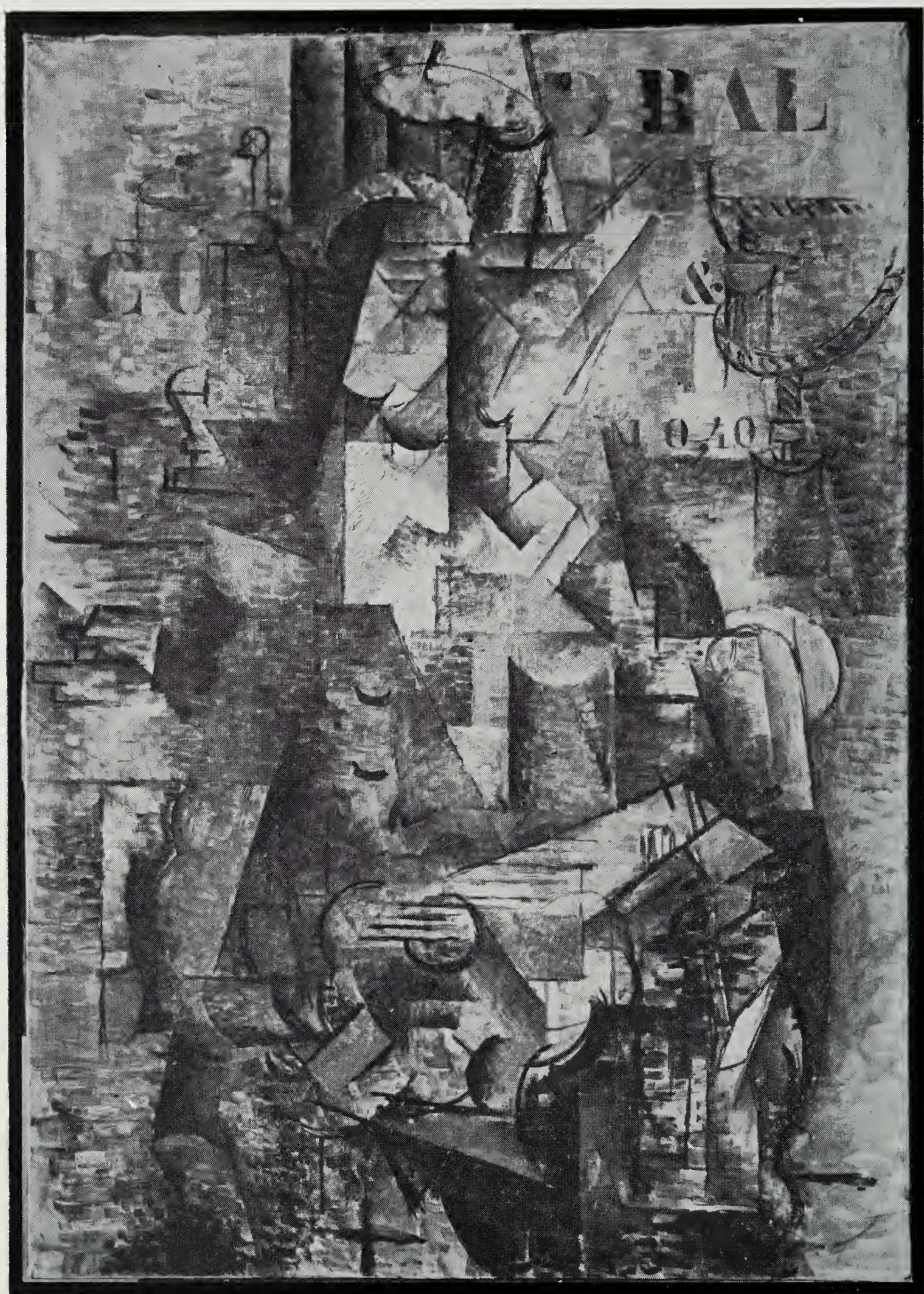
Corot

*Gypsy Girl at the Fountain*  
(Philadelphia Museum of Art—  
The George W. Elkins Collection)









Braque

*The Portuguese*  
(Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel)





Gritchenko

*Self-Portrait*  
(Collection of The Alexis Gritchenko Foundation,  
New York)

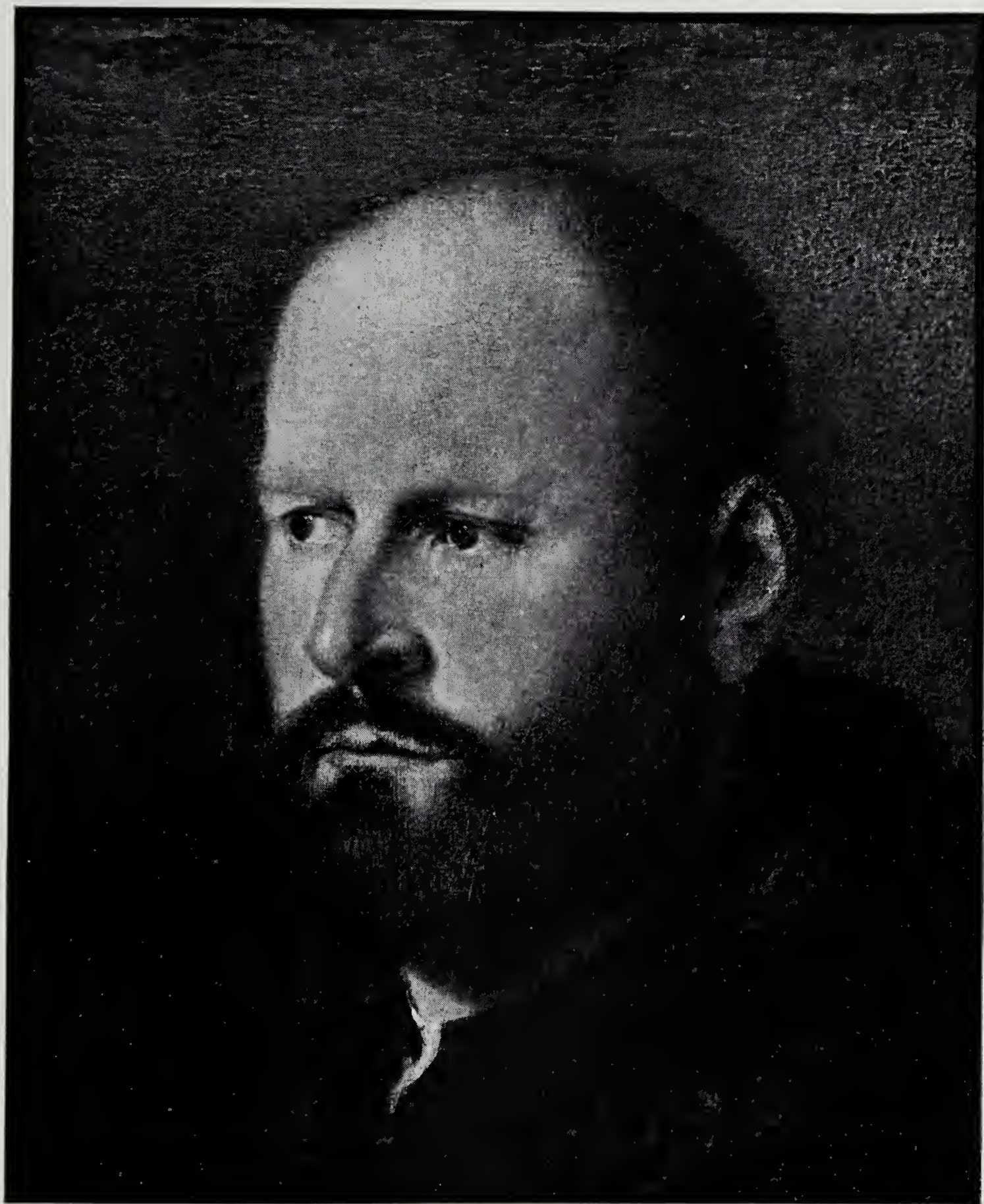




Renoir

*Woman Crocheting*





Titian

Detail from *Man and Son* (Plate 8)









Botticelli

*Madonna and Child*  
(Poldi-Pezzoli Museum, Milan)





School of Ghirlandaio

*Portrait of a Girl*  
(The National Gallery, London—  
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees,  
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Botticelli

*Portrait of a Woman*  
(Palatina Gallery, Pitti Palace, Florence)





Diagram—Curves in Titian *Man and Son* (Plate 8)



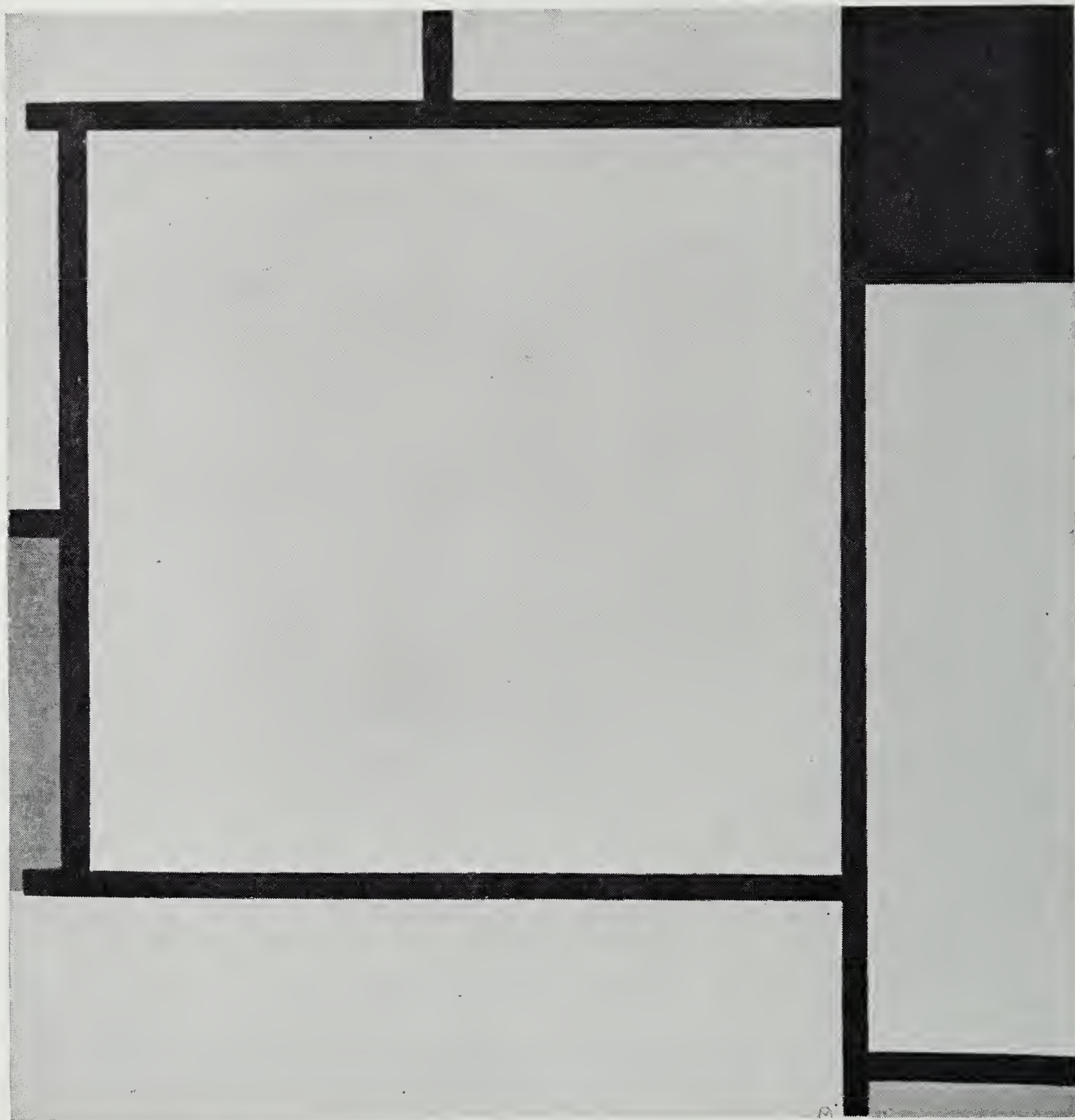


Matisse

*The Riffian*



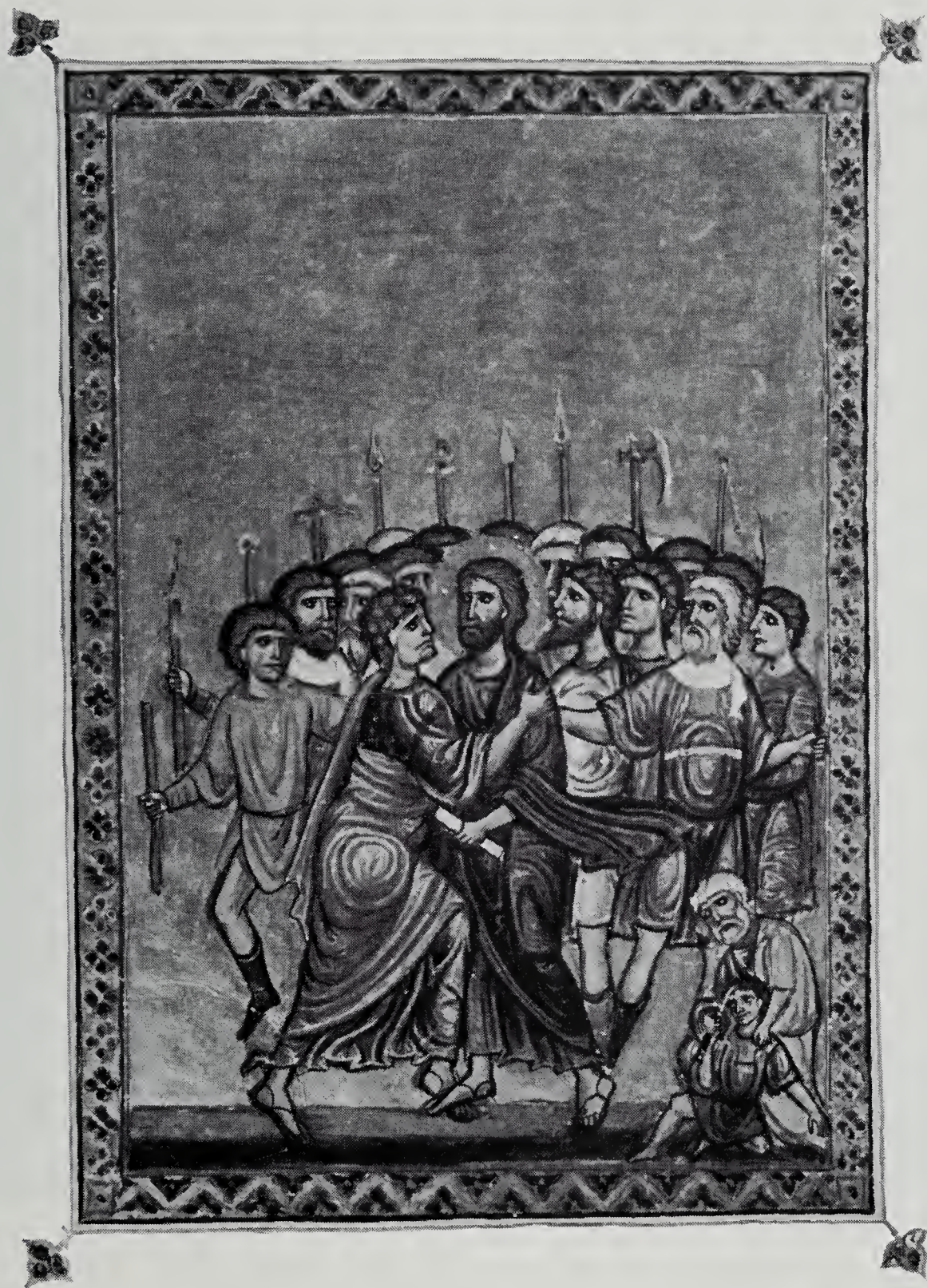
PLATE 32



Mondrian

*Composition 2*  
(The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)



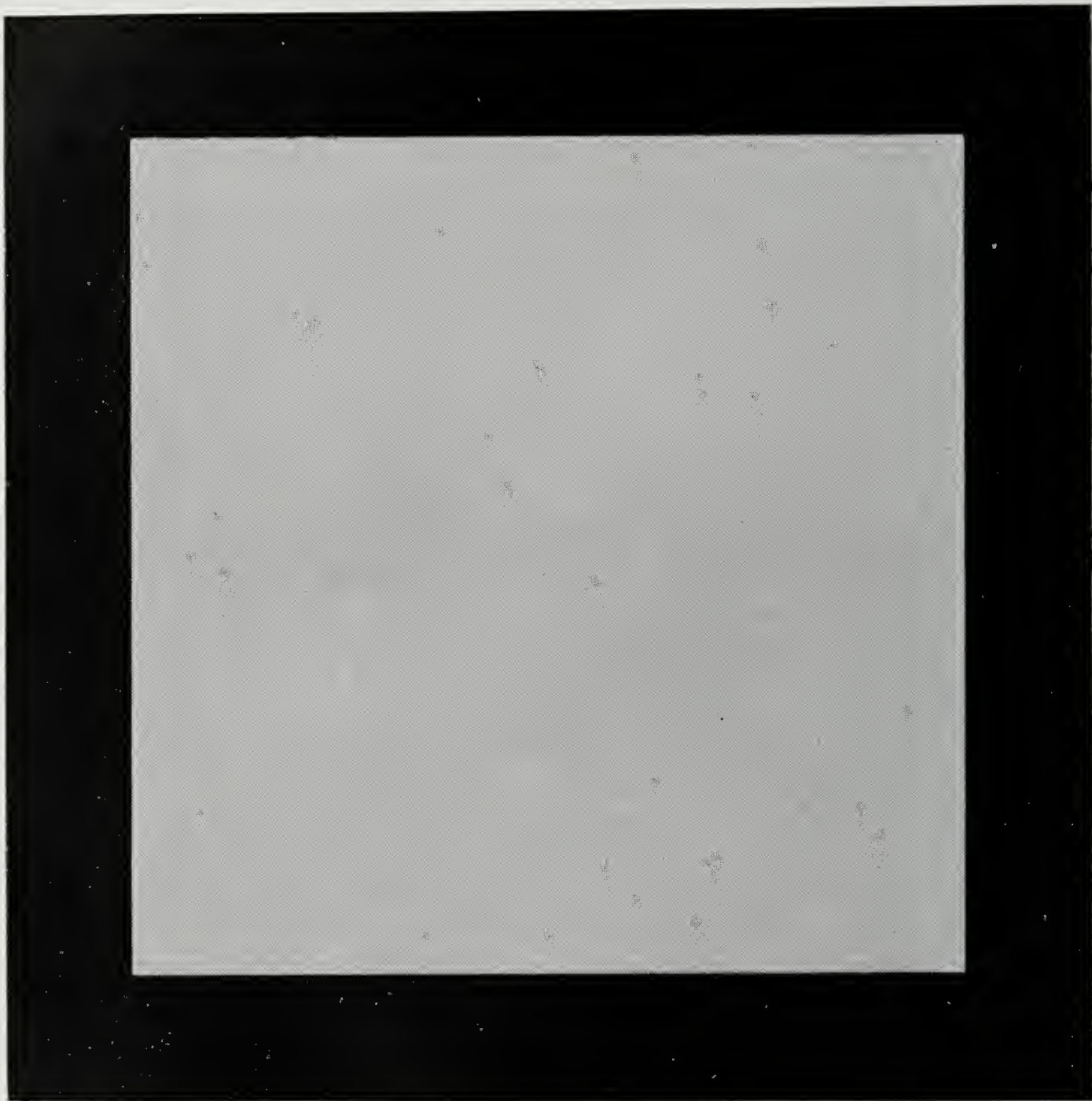


Basilios

*Christ Seized in the Garden*  
(The British Museum, London—  
Egerton MS 1139F7b.)



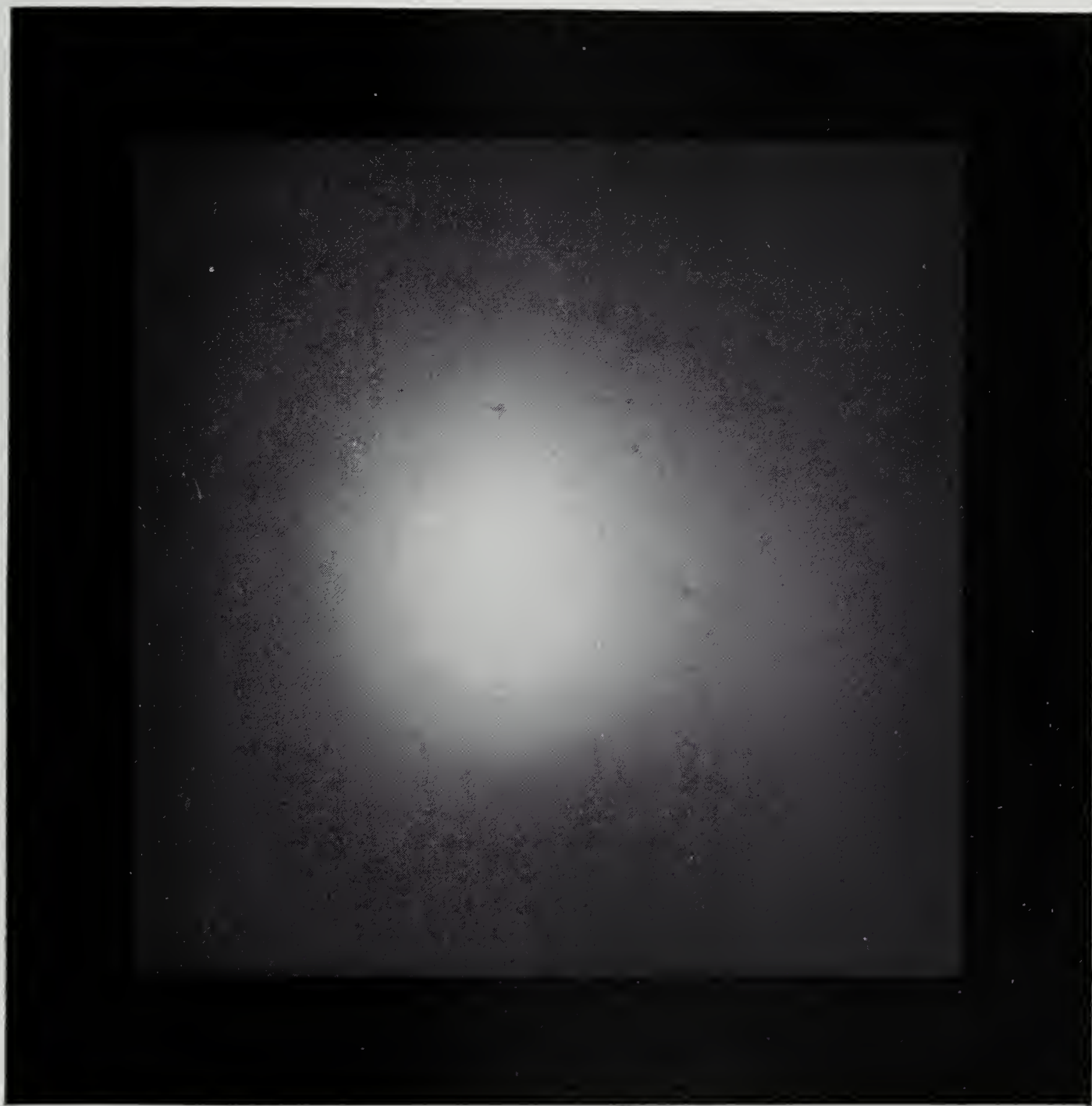
PLATE 34



Paper illuminated from the front—illustrating effect of Florentine light



PLATE 35



Paper illuminated from behind—illustrating effect of Venetian light





Titian

*Madonna and Child*  
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
—The Jules S. Bache Collection, 1949)





Tintoretto

*The Presentation of the Virgin*  
(Santa Maria dell'Orto, Venice  
Photograph—Alinari)









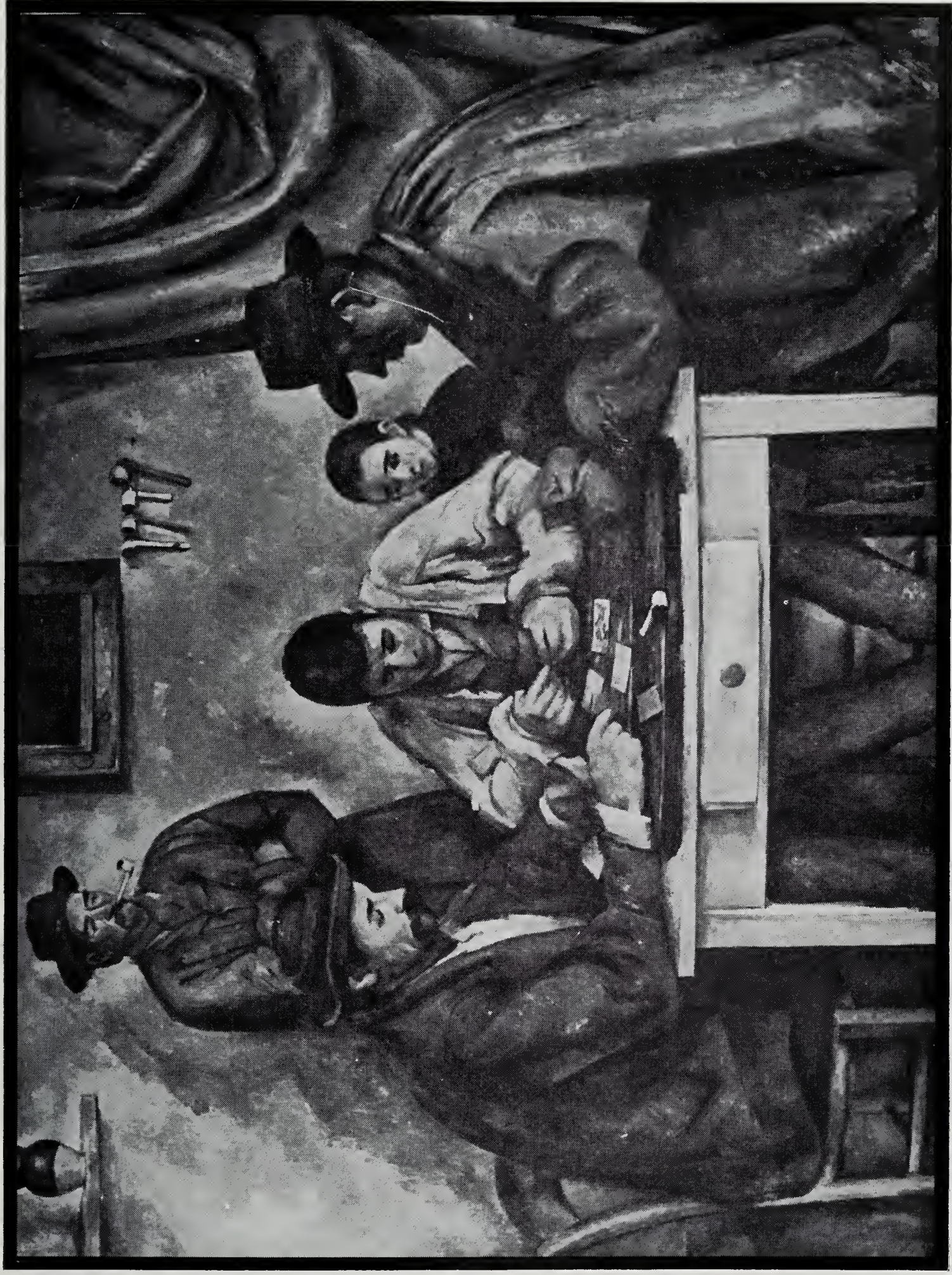
Shahn

*Portrait of Myself when Young*  
(Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

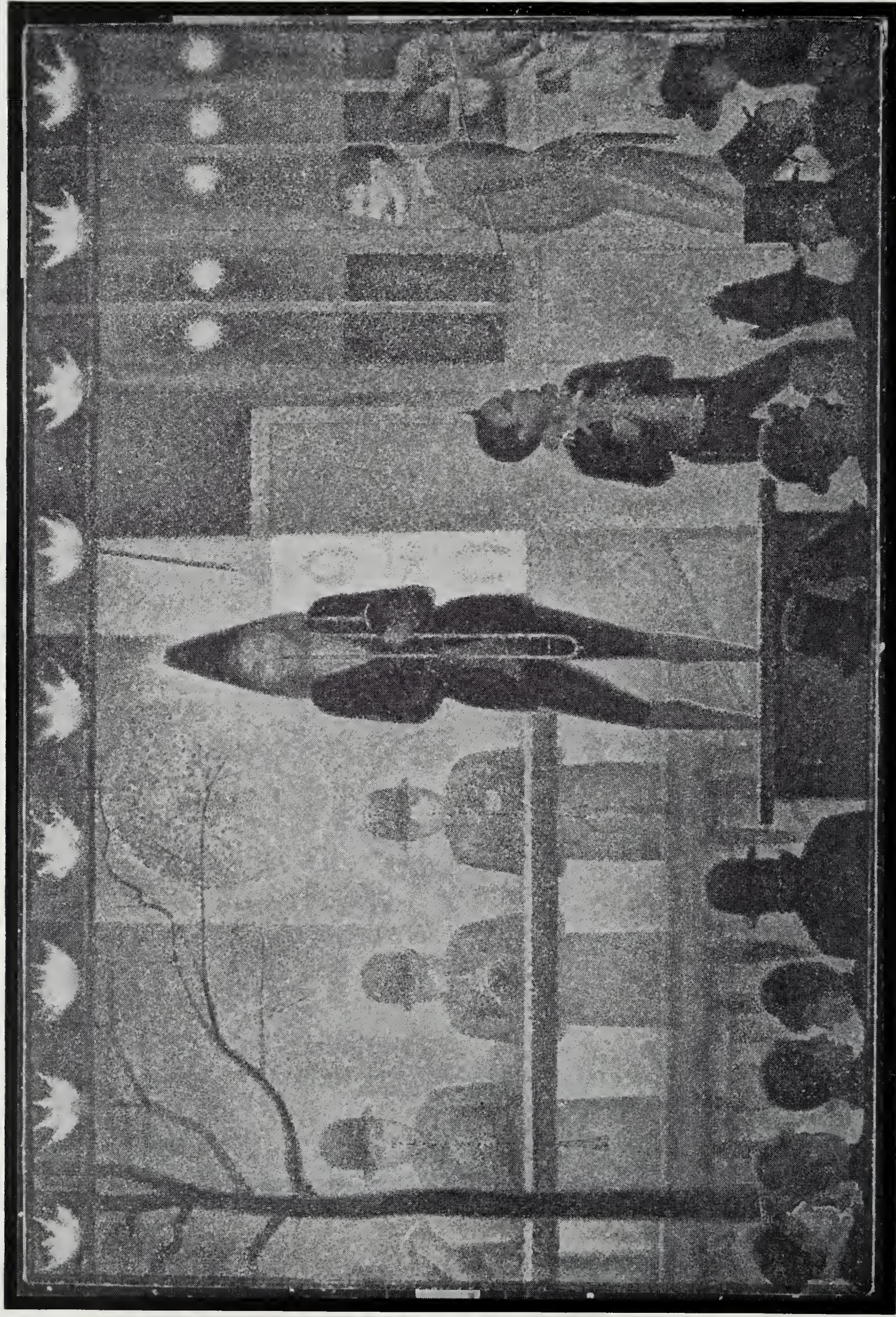
















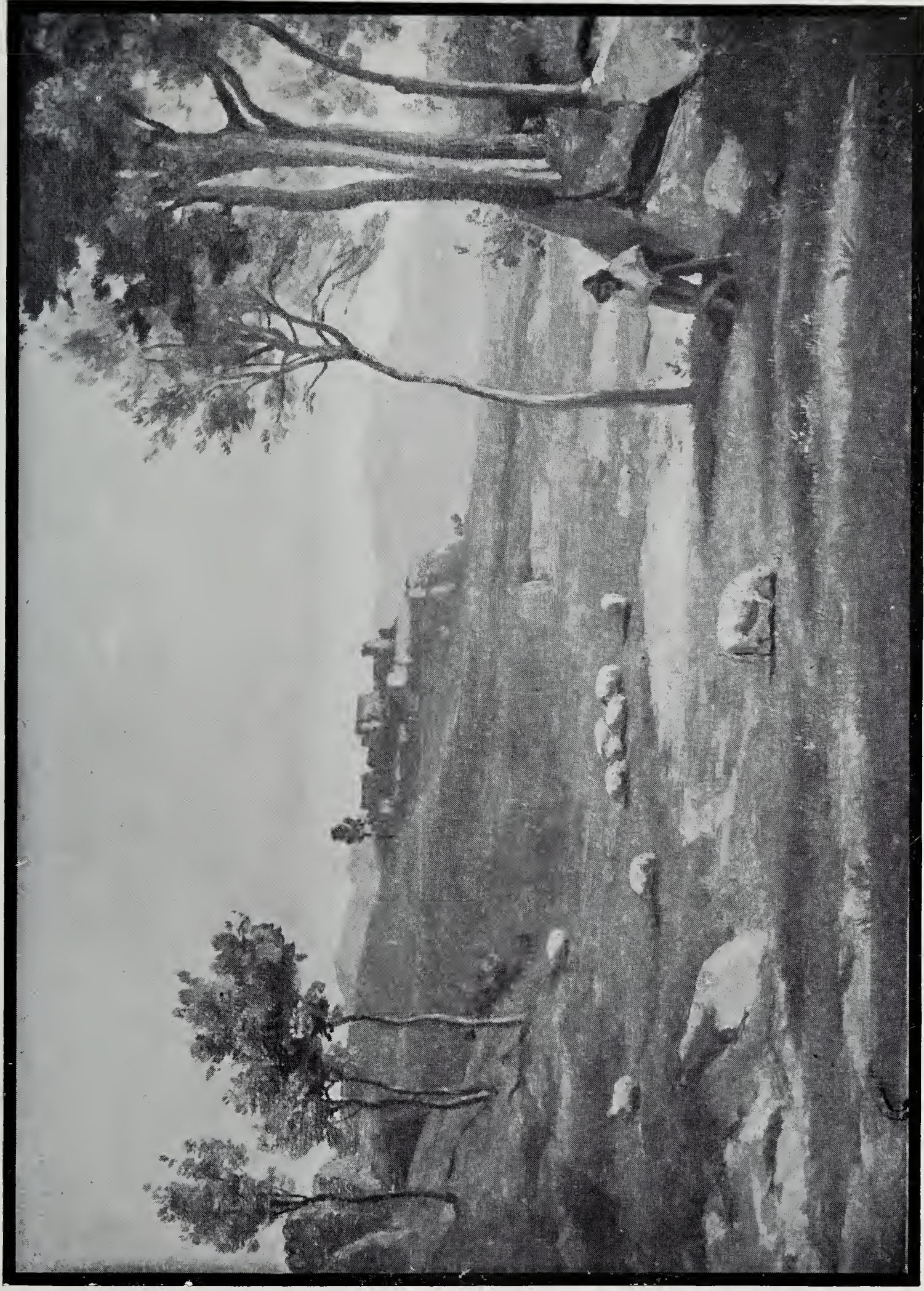




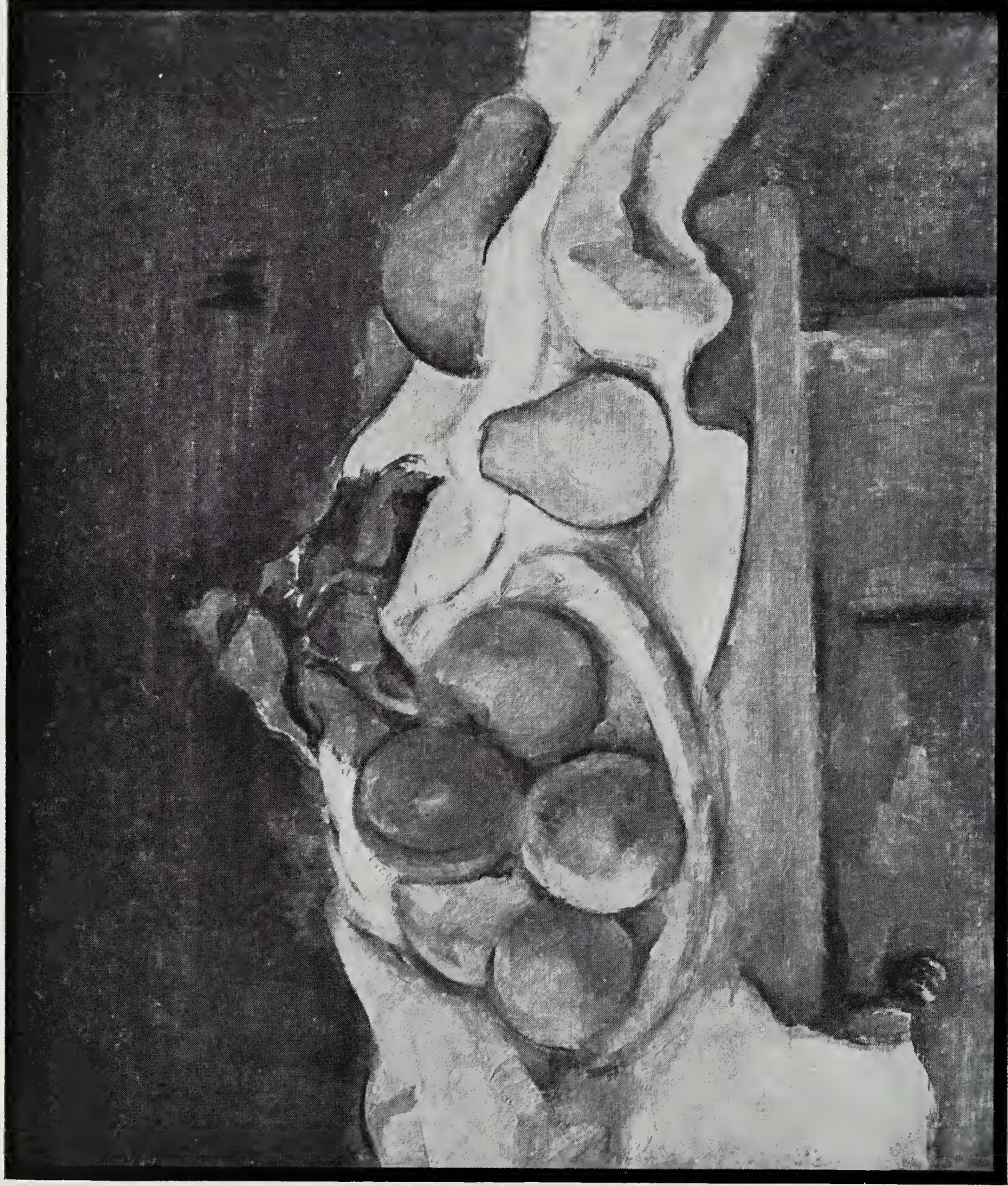
Corot

*The Dancing Nymphs*  
(Louvre, Paris)  
(Photograph—Musées Nationaux, Paris)









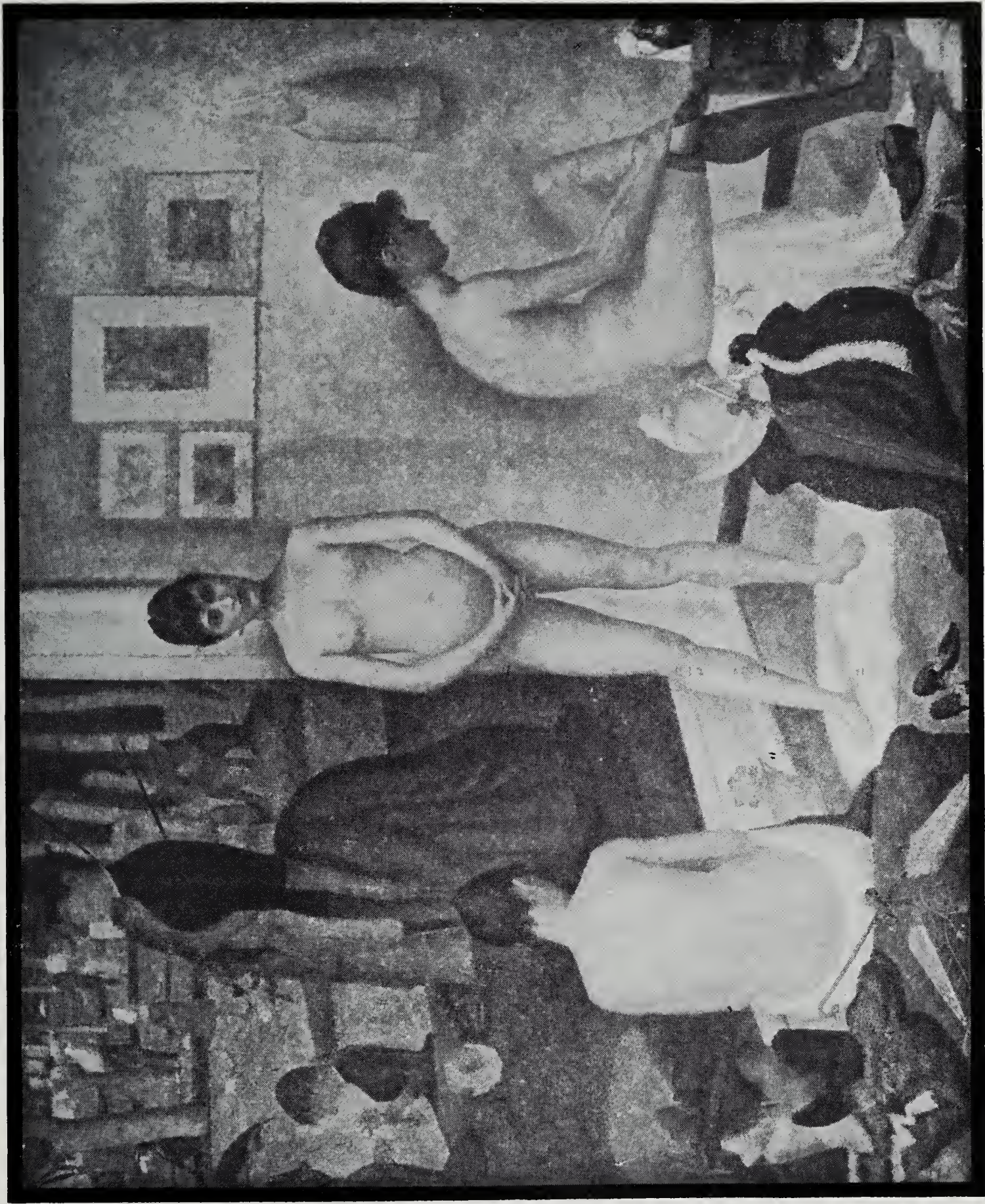






















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